



子方姫

ひつぎ

II

榊一郎

Ichirou Sakaki



ファンタジア文庫

Hitsugi no Chaika

vol.2

by Sakaki Ichirou

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榊一郎

●さかきいちろう

大阪府在住、自らを「軽小説屋」と呼んでいる。第9回ファンタジア長編小説大賞準入選作『ドラゴンズ・ウィル』でデビュー。主なシリーズに『スクラップド・プリンセス』『ストレイト・ジャケット』のほか、『まじしゃんず・あかでみい』（ファミ通文庫刊）、『神曲奏界ポリフォニカ』（GA文庫刊）などがある。



イラスト：なまにくATK（ニトロプラス）
カバーデザイン：Lightning

 ファンタジア文庫



棺姫の
チャイカⅢ



謎の少年
ギイ
GUY

「私は提供するだけ。
受け取るも拒み棄てるも君達の自由」

「あくまでもその場の思いつきですよ。僕の」

ジレット隊に属する亜人
レオナルド
Leonardo

棺担ぐ姫君
チャイカ・トラバント
chaika trabant



小太刀を使う乱戦師
トール・アキュラ
TOLL ACQUA

「戦乱上等だ。
もう二度戻してもらおう
じゃねえかよー」
戦国時代に

ドミニカが愛する妹
ルツィエ・スコダ
Lucie skoda

泣く。喚く。既に無い。
けどー哀しい。本当。

鎧い・重騎士
ドミニカ・スコダ
dominica skoda

「欲しければ私を倒して奪うが良い、戦場の犬共よ」





✧ C O N T E N T S ✧

序 章

0 0 5

竜騎士の帰還

RETURN OF THE DRAGOON CAVALIER

第 一 章

0 1 4

彷徨の始まり

BIGINING OF WANDERING

第 二 章

1 0 9

隠棲する英雄

RETIRING PALADIN

第 三 章

1 7 6

竜騎士の憂鬱

BLUENESS OF DARAGOON CAVALIER

第 四 章

2 5 1

ささやかなる戦争

THE LIMITED WAR

あとがき

3 4 6

アカリ・アキュラによる 妄想レポート



【アカリ・アキュラ】

私は乱破師のアカリ・アキュラだ。私と兄様は血の繋がった兄妹でありながら、許されざる禁断の恋に落ちてしまい、駆け落ちの末、今はフェルビスト大陸を放浪中の身——という設定なのだが、兄様は気に入らないらしい。殺伐とした現状に潤いをもたらそうというのが私の心遣いなのだが。やはり胸か。ありそうでなさそうな胸でなければ駄目なのか。

主人公

【トール・アキュラ】

畏れ多くもかしこくも、こちらが私の敬愛する兄様トールだ。好色で短小で(多分)目を離すと婦女子を手込めにしたがる様な変態なところが玉に瑕だが、優秀な乱破師でかけがえのない兄様だ。私が一番兄様を正しく理解していると自負しているが、兄様は「お前の脳内の俺はどんだけケダモノなんだよ」と不満そうだ。誰も自分自身の事は見えないものであるな。



【チャイカ・トラバント】

この娘は「ありそうでなさそうな胸」——もといチャイカ・トラバントという。兄様が山で拾ってきた妙な娘で、現在の我々の雇い主だ。「あるもの」を集めて大陸を放浪し私と兄様も付き合わされている。棺を背負って歩いてみたり、誰かに追われていたり……「いかにも訳ありですよ」と、存在感を主張し兄様の興味を惹き付けて止まないのが由々しい。実に由々しい。

Prologue: Prologue: Return of the Dragoon Cavalier

At first glance, she didn't realize what it was supposed to be.

It was just a stone pillar, only coming up to her knees. There was no way something this crude could ever be called a gravestone.

Actually, calling it a "stone pillar" was a stretch—it was nothing more than a cluster of roadside boulders stacked on top of each other. There was absolutely nothing to indicate its purpose. No markings, just rocks stacked up like the toy blocks a child might play with. Its horrendous simplicity conveyed no respect or reverence for the deceased. She would have gone right past it if she hadn't already known what it was.

"Th...This...? This is...?" moaned Dominica Scoda.

The ashen clouds hanging over her head seemed to tinge the noontime sky with a gloomy hue, and standing in front of a grave only served to heighten the effect.

"Lu...Lu...Lucie's..."

The elderly men of the village who had led her to this spot nodded, keeping their wrinkled faces bowed down. They were too intimidated to speak.

Naturally. After all, they were in the presence of their lord, who had returned home victorious after the long, tumultuous period of war. But Dominica was sure that what intimidated them most of all was actually the bizarre, hulking creature behind her.

Its gleaming silver—and—dark—black colors clashed with one another. Its great black wings were folded, and its long neck was bent downward. Its size dwarfed that of a cow or a horse—in fact, such animals were merely prey for this gigantic beast.

The positioning of its head and limbs might have suggested some semblance of a humanoid form, but the similarities stopped there. Its neck and limbs were

far longer than a human's, and it had a horn on top of its horse-like, ovular head. However, the biggest departure from human physiology was the long tail protruding from its midsection.

While it resembled a human in some ways, it was not human.

Though it had wings, it was not a bird.

And though it had a tail, it was not a mere beast.

It was an undoubtedly strange creature.

But what most distinctly distinguished it from any other being was the fact that it had no distinguishing features at all. That was because the surface of its body was covered—but not in fur, nor in blubber. Some would say that it looked to them like scales, yet these were clearly not the scales of a snake or lizard. They were large, and had formed themselves over the creature's body, covering its entire surface and giving the creature the appearance of having plate mail armor like cavaliers would wear.

For that reason, creatures like these were given the name “dragoons”—armored dragons.

She kept telling everyone not to be scared, that it was all right, but with the overbearing presence of the monster before them, it was natural that they'd all be afraid. In fact, by not screaming and running away, these old men guiding Dominica had certainly shown that they had guts. The first time she had come face-to-face with this dragoon, even Dominica herself was so overwhelmed that she could barely stand.

“Lucie...”

Dumbstruck, she uttered the name of the one buried beneath the gravestone. Her little sister Lucie had been the only family she had left.

“Big sis, big sis—”

She was her only blood-related sister, dearly beloved. Even now, when she closed her eyes, Dominica could see her smiling face. Through all the silence, she could hear her voice in her head...

“Big sis, look at this flower! Wouldn't it look great in your hair?”

“It sure would. Why don’t we also take some to Mama and Papa’s graves?”

The Scodas were a family of cavaliers that had fallen on hard times. As countryside nobles, they didn’t own much land, and it had taken all they had just to live modestly while keeping up the bare minimum of appearances as a cavalier family.

Before Lucie was able to comprehend the world around her, their father, who should have been there to protect his family, went to war and never returned. Dominica figured that he just hadn’t been suited for battle—though theirs was technically a family of cavaliers, those born into it did have their own fields they dabbled in. And several years after their father left, their mother succumbed to illness.

Their mother had been earnest to a fault, just like their father. She must have suffered so, having to raise two daughters all by herself with the little income they had, all while trying to retain the dignity of the Scoda household. To be honest, she had to deal with so much that even if she had been cured, she couldn’t have been saved.

“Big sis, we’ll be having duck today, right?”

“Wait just a bit. I’m making my special mustard sauce you love so much!”

After that, Dominica and her little sister Lucie had lived together under the same roof.

Sparse as it was, they did still own land, so they had received enough income to live on—at first. However, it became gradually apparent that the residents of their village were skipping out on paying their taxes. Sure, the Scodas were “nobility”, but the previous head of the household had been killed in action, and he had only left behind two girls without servants who weren’t even twenty years old, so of course no would take them seriously. And the two girls had no means of challenging this disrespect.

Dominica had realized that it couldn’t go on like this.

At the time, there was no sign that the long period of war was coming to an end any time soon.

On the contrary—the front lines were always being pushed back, and there

was no telling when Dominica and her sister's hometown would become a battlefield as well. Considering the small amount of land they owned and their current meager nobility status, Dominica feared they might even be abandoned by their own country. Taking all this into consideration, there was a real danger of being smothered by the flames of war.

"Bis sis...why...?"

When Dominica had told her sister that she was heading off to war, Lucie had been crestfallen. Dominica remembered the painful reluctance in her heart that day—but regardless, she had already made up her mind at that point. There was no turning back.

If she attained some accolades on the battlefield, she would be able to increase the amount of land she owned, or perhaps even move her territory further away from the front lines. Even the villagers would respect her as a lord then.

She had no backing from anyone. In this world ravaged by war, this was the only way she could protect her sister.

"Big sis...when will you be back?"

Of course, even though she came from a family of cavaliers, she hadn't known the first thing about martial arts. The one who should have taught her how to fight, her father, was dead, and getting someone with any renown to teach her required a great deal of both money and time. It went without saying that she could afford to spare neither of those.

Thus, the ways she could go about gaining accolades within the army were limited. No—truthfully, there was only one method available to her. She never had the luxury of choosing in the first place.

In order to keep that dream alive, she gave her own body away.

In other words...

"Lucie..."

There, in front of the pitiful grave, Dominica fell to her knees.

"The war finally ended, and yet..."

She had received the accolades she had desired, acquired new land as part of her spoils, and returned home victorious...and even after all that, this was the result.

“Why...why did it have to be like this?”

“Look at that...”

Around her, the villagers looked like they were explaining to each other the circumstances of Lucie’s death, but Dominica hardly heard any of what they were saying. She was completely focused on what was in front of her—her deceased sister lying beneath the dirt. There was no way she could think of anything else at a time like this.

Everything had been for the sake of her sister. There was no one else she felt the need to protect. There were other things that she *could* protect, but it was solely because of her sister that she felt like she needed to protect anything in the first place. It was for her sake that she offered up her body to burly soldiers and “purebred” cavaliers and the like, a harrowing method of getting on the battlefield that most would flinch from.

And when she got there, she had fought and fought until she had received her rewards. But...

“I...”

Had she been wrong to go to war?

Perhaps she should have never left her sister’s side. Even if she wasn’t able to avoid her fateful demise, she could have cared for her sister while on her deathbed. Then they could have at least passed away together.

Surely Lucie must have waited every day on tenterhooks for her sister’s return.

She must have died while being utterly consumed by loneliness and despair.

When Dominica thought that...she couldn’t bear it any longer.

“Oh...ohhh...ooohhh...”

Right there, in front of Lucie’s grave, Dominica broke down and wept.

She balled up both her hands in fists and slammed the ground repeatedly as she sobbed, paying no heed to the dirt smearing her once-glistening silver armor. Not knowing how best to deal with the grief endlessly welling up inside her, she put all the feelings she couldn't express into her fists and continued to pound the ground.

Then, a noise resounded from the cloudy sky hanging over Dominica.

“Oooooooooohhhhh...ooooooooohhhhhh...”

A howl that almost completely echoed Dominica's sobs issued forth from the dragon in silver armor. Head tilted back to the heavens, its large body trembled as it released its lament toward the darkened, cloudy expanse above.

Chapter 1: Beginning of Wandering

Part 1

He saw a strange creature in the pale blue moonlight.

...No, to be frank, calling it an “object” was probably more accurate, because it had no arms, legs, features, nor anything resembling a head distinguishable from the rest of its body. It had no defined form; it was constantly shape-shifting. Initially, he hadn’t even been able to tell if the thing in front of him was standing up or rolling around on the ground. Tohru Acura just continued to watch the strange spectacle in front of him, completely nonplussed.

“...”

It appeared to be amorphous, and it never sat still—it constantly nudged itself along the ground, covering itself in leaves and dirt as it moved. It didn’t have a mouth, eyes, or nose. Anyone looking at it at a glance would probably only be able to describe it as “a clump of something.” It was as if the mud and earth had been given form and was writhing around—an aberration, clearly out of the ordinary.

“...Chaika...”

The night air was chilly enough that Tohru’s voice came out in cloudy white breaths against the darkness.

Chaika.

That was the name of his master—the girl who had decided to employ him. Silver hair, petite frame, frail appearance—a princess with no empire to call home. Every one of her features was as perfect, as if a master craftsman had designed her. A delicate body that looked like it would break if hugged tightly. Smooth, white skin without a single blemish.

The thing in front of him had none of these qualities. It was just a filthy clump of leaves and dirt—it didn’t even resemble anything human.

“Are those your...your...” Tohru uttered, dumbfounded. He blinked his eyes

over and over—somewhere in his mind he had entertained the ridiculous notion that the sight in front of him was a mere illusion, and that it would disappear in an instant if he blinked several times.

At last, Tohru accepted that it was real, and asked in a clipped, resigned voice,

“...Are those your pajamas?”

“Yes.”

Chaika’s nodding head popped out from the clump. There was probably something like a collar, or some kind of incision.

Long silver hair, violet eyes, fair white skin—there was no question that she was the same Chaika as before.

What had changed was what she was wearing.

“Heat insulation, outstanding,” said the girl whose neck was sticking out of the clump, Chaika Trabant.

“Yeah, sure, but...”

“Camouflage capability, also outstanding.”

As evidenced by her tendency to speak with a strange intonation that was almost like reciting a verse, she didn’t appear to be very proficient in the common language of the continent. She was somehow able to understand what was being said to her pretty well, though.

“Well yeah, that too, but...” Tohru’s voice came out like a groan. “Just what kind of stuff are you into, anyway?”

“Critical importance. Practicality, highest priority.”

“...”

Tohru took a second look at Chaika’s “pajamas.” Though, truthfully, they were less like actual clothing and more like a kind of sleeping bag. Specifically, a bag made of cloth that could envelop a single person. It wasn’t a typical tubular sleeping bag; it appeared to have enough room to move around while inside it.

Its exterior was covered with thin netting that had been doubled and redoubled, and once inside, Chaika had deliberately rolled around on the

ground around here to pick up the leaves and mud, effectively making her disguise complete. The exterior added to the disguise's overall nonhuman appearance—from a short distance, you probably wouldn't be able to tell anyone was there.

"Well, you're a wizard, so a disguise like this is probably necessary..."

"Myself, made. Rather proud," Chaika nodded with enthusiasm.

"The best defense is to stay undetected, huh?"

"Indeed."

"But there's no reason for you to wear something like this right now. It's a nuisance, so take it off."

"Mui?"

"We're keeping watch over the area," Tohru said.

Currently, Tohru's group was in the middle of a mountain forest. They were surrounded by trees, so the fallen leaves and humus covered their footprints. After setting up camp here, Tohru had laid out several "barriers."

Of course, these were fundamentally different from the magical defense barriers a wizard would put up, or even the typical barriers one would use when keeping watch. These measures were simpler—he had merely hidden small dead branches, thin enough that they would easily break, underneath the fallen leaves. When stepped on with one's full body weight, they would emit a basic noise that would alert him to the intruder's presence.

On top of that, he had also strung thin black thread along the row of trees, and had hung bells along it. That way, even if someone approached in a manner other than walking on the ground, such as using the branches above to get through, they would still trigger a sound.

"Look, it's like this. Sure, it's inconspicuous, and it's difficult to identify you at a glance. But what if you need to move, and all you can do is crawl?"

"...Mu." Chaika frowned. It seemed like she didn't take too kindly to Tohru speaking ill of her beloved 'pajamas.' "Problem, none. Rapid mobility, possible."

"...Oh?" Tohru narrowed his eyes. "Then why don't you try circling around this

tree? Running, of course.”

“Understood.”

As if demonstrating how simple the task was, Chaika began to move quickly toward the enormous tree Tohru was pointing at. But...

“Migyaa!?” She hadn’t even taken three steps before falling face first onto the ground. The timing was comical. Now her pajamas weren’t the only thing covered in mud and fallen leaves—her white face and silver hair had also been sullied.

“What’d I tell you?”

“Uu. Incomprehensible.”

“Clothes are made the way they are for a reason, you know. That skirt you’re always wearing, for instance, is hemmed so that you can move around in it, obviously.”

On top of that, the thin netting easily picked up the mud and fallen leaves, which meant that it would also easily pick up any large objects like branches in the area. In other words, while it was true that her pajamas were well-suited for not being discovered, they were woefully useless when it came to making a quick escape.

“But...masterpiece...” Chaika looked despondent. Since her pajamas that she had been so proud of made it hard to tell the difference between her and the ground, it ended up looking like she was a disembodied head that had fallen on the ground, lamenting its fate. It was a strange spectacle, to be sure.

“Whatever, just take it off already!”

Tohru reached his hand over to Chaika, who was still on the ground from where she had fallen.

Then, in the next instant, there was a whooshing noise. A blade grazed Tohru’s outstretched fingers and lodged itself in the humus.

...A hatchet.

“What!?” Tohru instinctively pulled his hand back and prepared himself for battle.

Hatchets were normally used for things like clearing away underbrush, cutting up firewood, or even capturing animals—this type of blade was typically too bulky for use in such a crude manner as this. The blade wasn't even that sharp—it was its sheer weight that made it capable of severing its target.

Throwing a weapon like that at full force...if it had connected with Tohru's hand at all, it could have easily taken off one or two of his fingers.

"Nii-sama..." A toneless voice came out from the darkness, between the rows of trees. It was a voice filled with indifference, containing absolutely no trace of human emotion. "What in the world is the meaning of this?"

"That's what I want to ask you, you idiot!" Tohru yelled. "What the hell do you think you're doing out of the blue!?"

"That's precisely what I would like to ask you, Nii-sama." The lean, tall figure of a girl emerged from the darkness and approached Tohru.

Her long slits for eyes and polite speech gave the impression that she was an adult, yet she was only seventeen. She had long, flowing black hair, yet it was tied up in a ponytail in the back, which made her look almost boyish. She had slender limbs, but they were by no means frail. She wore a leather-bound quasi-armor over her clothes, giving the appearance of a female deer draped over her body.

Akari Acura.

She was Tohru's younger sister, though they weren't related by blood, but by obligation. It looked like she had just returned from hunting—in her left hand was a strangled bird, dangling by the wing. Though she had most likely extracted most of its blood and internal organs, there was still some blood left, and it continued to drip onto the ground as she walked, making her appearance seem ghastly. Had any children come across her here at night, they would have undoubtedly wet themselves with fear, tears streaming down their face.

"Doing something like this in the middle of the night..." Akari fixed her dark eyes onto Tohru. "Seizing a young girl and ordering her to strip..."

"...Eh?" Tohru had no idea what she was talking about. Sure, he had told Chaika to take that thing off, but...

“Ah—that wasn’t, I meant...” Tohru began quickly, shaking his head. “It’s absolutely not what you’re thinking, okay?”

“Mui? Undress, no need?”

Chaika, who was in the middle of removing her pajamas, tilted her head quizzically at Tohru. He probably should have guessed this, but since she had called them “pajamas”, it stood to reason that she wasn’t wearing anything underneath them. What’s more, due to the chill of the night, her normally snow-white skin was faintly tinged with red, inviting even more misunderstandings.

“Why the hell did you choose *now* to take it off!?”

“Tohru, not make sense,” she said, puffing up her cheeks.

“It seems my Nii-sama is up to no good again,” said Akari, shaking her head as if to imply *good grief*. And of course, saying it completely devoid of expression like that made her statement terrifyingly transparent. Incidentally, it was less that she actually had a limited range of human emotions, and more that she was just remarkably bad at expressing them—though for what reason, Tohru had no idea.

“In the short time that I took my eyes off you, you immediately attempted to lay your hands on this young girl.”

“Don’t make me sound so horrible!” yelled Tohru. “Who in the hell would—”

“But if that’s just simply my Nii-sama’s disposition as a man, I suppose it can’t be helped.”

“Listen, you—”

“No matter how perverted or depraved, no matter how small it is or how quick you are to perform, you are still the Nii-sama I love and respect so much. As your younger sister, it is my duty to accept everything about you!”

Akari spread her arms out wide, as if she was saying, *Now, Nii-sama, jump into my arms!* She was still dangling the strangled bird by its wing, so Tohru got the feeling that the same fate might happen to him if he did so.

“...Wait a second, don’t add unnecessary things to that statement!”



“Unnecessary?”

“You don’t need to bring up things like how big or small it might be!” Never mind how quick or slow he was to perform.

“It’s very necessary. That’s an important area,” said Akari solemnly. “Well, it seems I must confirm for myself then. As your sister.”

“Like hell!”

“Now then. Undress, Nii-sama,” Akari quietly ordered him. “If my Nii-sama insists on illogical courses of action such as ordering someone to undress when he himself refuses to, I’m afraid I have a hard time believing him.”

“Just believe me already!”

As soon as Tohru had yelled that, he picked up the hatchet that had remained embedded in the ground and immediately hurled it back to Akari with a flick of his wrist. With just one hand, Akari caught it, completely unconcerned, spun it around with her fingers, and slid it back into the holster on her waist.

“Ahh, goddammit...why the hell am I on this mountain, anyway?”

“We’re setting up camp, aren’t we?” replied Akari in a tone of voice that implied, you’re asking this now?

“Oh, of course. *How could I forget?!*” spat Tohru hatefully.

In order to catch her hatchet, Akari had thrown the bird over to Tohru, and he now caught it.

“And what the hell are we going to do with this? Eating it raw’s gonna suck.”

“Well, you say that, Nii-sama, but we can’t very well light a fire here,” replied Akari.

It was obvious why. Even something like lighting a fire in the middle of the mountains would be much too conspicuous. And even if they were to somehow conceal the fire itself, the smoke or even its scent would be more than enough to tip anyone off. There was nothing they could do.

Tohru’s group was being pursued. They had to take whatever measures they could to reduce the risk of being discovered.

“Pickling it in salt is an option, I guess—except we don’t have nearly enough

salt on hand. No utensils either...”

“Tohru.” He felt two tugs on his sleeve, and there was Chaika. She was no longer half-naked. He didn’t know when she had done it, but at some point she had already changed back into her regular black-and-white outfit.

“Cooking. With magic, can do.”

Chaika pointed to herself.

“Ah, I guess that could work out, then. Can I count on you though?”

“Yes.” She nodded enthusiastically, and reached over to the black box leaning against the side of the large tree. It was a long, octagonal box, long enough to fit a person inside.

It was a coffin.

But when she opened it up, what was inside was obviously not a dead body, but pieces of a contraption made of wood and metal. There was a long tube, various complex mechanical parts, and a wooden piece resembling a grip. With an experienced hand, Chaika began setting it all up.

In no time at all, she assembled and prepared the device for use. The completed product was rich in length, even longer than Chaika herself.

It was a magical device called a “Gundo.” Those who were called “wizards” used them as a kind of wand in order to use and control their magic. Formerly, magic had been a technique that required countless drawn-out rituals in order to use, but with the advent of these devices, handling it had become much simpler. After taking the piece called the “connecting cord” and fastening it around her neck, Chaika pointed to a branch growing on the large tree next to Tohru.

“Tohru. Meat, skewer. That branch, use.”

“This one?”

“Yes.” She nodded, and aimed her Gundo at the now-skewered bird. Then—*“Aimuru...lai...Deruza...Torugu...Irugu...”* Peeking through the scope with one eye shut, she started chanting incomprehensibly. Then, at last, light-blue phosphorescent lights began to appear around her.

They didn't resemble flames or lightning—they appeared right there in the night sky, and in the next moment, began to expand in all directions, forming a complex pattern.

It was a magic circuit, specially designed to regulate and control magic into a fixed direction. What were originally just fragments of light came together and slowly revolved around the Gundo's center. Then, they all converged, concentrating around a single point, and became a large magic circle.

"Now come, 'The Boiler!'" Chaika declared, completely confident in herself. And in the next moment, though he couldn't see it, he felt like something had taken hold of the bird on the skewer, enveloping it. There was no light, or even any sound, yet Tohru knew that some sort of force had to be at work. Then...

"Oh—wow."

A faint smell of roasted meat immediately reached his nose.

Being able to cook something in such a short amount of time without even using a flame—it was so convenient, it was almost scary.

Tohru looked at Chaika with admiration, and then—

"Ah."

She blinked her eyes several times.

And immediately afterwards...the cooked bird exploded.

"Yaggh!?"

Of course, that cry of pain was due to the flaming pieces of bird meat scattering every which way, including the area where Tohru was standing. Tohru was confident in his evasion skills, but even so, it was impossible to avoid all of them.

"Hot...! W-What the hell was that!?"

Wiping a searing piece of meat from his face, Tohru turned to look at the bird on the skewer.

There was no other way to describe how it looked except "pitiful." All the meat and entrails inside had been blown off, leaving nothing left but the skin

hanging off of the bone.

“What the hell happened!?”

“...” Chaika just stood there with her eyes wide. Then...

“Tehe.”

She smiled apologetically.

“Don’t just try to gloss over it!” yelled Tohru.

Basically, it seemed like Chaika had messed up when increasing the heat. She had added too much heat too fast, causing the inside of the bird to boil in mere moments, expand, and then explode. As a result, the bird had been torn asunder.

He remembered. This girl called Chaika—she had an extraordinary ability to focus when it counted, but in exchange was a total klutz when it came to normal tasks, with or without magic.

“How could I forget...” moaned Tohru as he brushed the remaining pieces of meat off of his clothes.

“Well, that was absolutely pointless,” declared Akari. And it wasn’t hard to see why—with the meat having made such a showy explosion, never mind the smoke, the smell alone was enough to give them away.

“Ah, dammit...” Tohru raised his head to the moon overlooking the night sky and breathed a large sigh.

The saboteur, Tohru Acura.

“Maybe my decision was too hasty after all?”

Even at the onset, he was already facing enough hardships to make him regret having gone on this journey.

Part 2

The interminably long period of war was over.

The empire at the center of the maelstrom, the Gaz Empire of the North, had crumbled, and with its demise came the end of the tumultuous era that had lasted for more than three generations.

“Taboo Emperor”, “Demon King”, “Immortal King”, “Great Sage”, “Incredible Emperor”, “Master Tactician”—though others gave him countless monikers, he called himself the most powerful wizard, the emperor of the Gaz Empire, Arthur Gaz. And yet, even a monstrous monarch like him had been subjugated. He had been completely overwhelmed by the sheer amount of resources that the allied forces of the surrounding countries had possessed. Unable to fight back, he had been captured, and it was said that his body had been destroyed in an explosion. As a result, the empire that had been under his iron-fisted rule had easily collapsed. Half of his retainers ended up dead while the other half escaped, scattering all over the continent of Verbist.

Shortly thereafter, the Gaz Empire’s land and assets were divided among the other countries, an act which included the confiscation of its magical technology. Additionally, the other countries were preoccupied with rebuilding their ruined economies and land, so none of them opted to start any more wars. Thus, an era of peace came about.

However, it wasn’t like there was a clear line between the two eras, as if there was war one day and peace the next. In particular, the period of chaos had been so long that it had completely transformed the way the people had lived; thus, when this era of peace rolled around, many of them put the cart before the horse, refusing to accept the fact that peace had come.

For instance, the countless workers that manufactured goods for the military.

For instance, the merchants that made a living trafficking soldiers of the occupying forces.

Or even the saboteurs of the Acura clan like Tohru and Akari, whose village produced humans capable of flourishing only in the midst of battle.

They were people whose very way of life revolved around war. They were completely useless in this era of peace. But even though they knew that, there was no way they could change their ways of life to fit the times. It had already been indelibly ingrained into their minds and bodies, so there was nothing for it.

They had been abandoned by the times.

And then...there was Chaika Trabant. Or, going by her true name, Chaika Gaz.

She was Arthur Gaz's flesh and blood, and she, too, had no place in this new era, nor could she wish for one.

*

After a meager dinner, a discussion was held.

"Now, what are we going to do from here on out?" asked Tohru as he sat, scratching his back with a branch he had plucked from the enormous tree. Akari was sitting to his left, and Chaika was on the opposite side facing the two of them. Though they hadn't lit a fire, he could see both of their faces in the moonlight.

To tell the truth, in the five days since they had left Del Solant, this was the first time they had had a chance to actually sit down and talk. Until now, there had been no good opportunity to do so, since they had been so preoccupied with trying to shake off their pursuers. They had continued to move throughout the day and night without rest. Tohru and Akari aside, Chaika had just about reached her limit of exhaustion.

"We need to figure out a general idea of where we're going."

"Mui?"

Even though she was the one at the center of all this, Chaika had a blank expression on her face. It seemed like up until now, she had been searching for her father's "keepsakes" with absolutely no plan, but...

"There's no doubt those guys were adamant about capturing you. Do you even understand the situation we're in? If you don't, then no matter how hard we search for your father's 'keepsakes' or how far we run away from that pain-

in-the-ass trio, we won't get anywhere." Tohru gave her a scowl.

Chaika was being pursued as the daughter of the "Taboo Emperor," Arthur Gaz. A motley crew of an assassin, a cavalier, and a mercenary had all come together to find any remnants of his empire—which included Chaika. Due to various circumstances, Tohru had wound up squaring off against them, and then ended up as one of Chaika's bodyguards.

"...Understand." Chaika nodded earnestly.

This girl...when she made expressions like that, she really did resemble a cute, pristine doll on the surface...but maybe that really was all there was to her. She was a wizard in name, sure, which was strange, but it wasn't like there weren't other wizards.

Which begged the question: at the very least, why did that bunch see her as a threat and go out of their way to chase her everywhere? Tohru couldn't see her as a dangerous person. Of course, it was already apparent that there was a discrepancy between her appearance and her actual talent, and whether she was on the side of good or evil, there had to be some reason why she was being pursued.

"In the first place," began Tohru, narrowing his eyes, "are you really *that* Arthur Gaz's daughter?"

"Affirmative," nodded Chaika. "Actual princess." She puffed her meager chest out. It seemed that no matter what, this girl wasn't going to feel any sense of tension towards her current situation.

"Yeah, you can be haughty all you want, but..."

"Respect, demand," she issued, pointing to her face.

Though she was technically Tohru's master, he was often rude to her...after all, she was clearly much younger than him. Though Chaika had suddenly announced herself as a princess, Tohru had never treated her as such, which was probably what unsatisfied her.

"So...what's your ultimate goal, then?"

"Father's remains, collect." Her reply was immediate.

Yes. She was trying to collect her father's remains—the remains of the “Demon King” Arthur Gaz.

Apparently, at the time of the battle where Arthur Gaz was captured, his body had been divided into pieces, and each of the heroes that participated in the final battle took a piece back with them.

This was a body where many powerful thoughts had resided for a long time, and as a result had become a source of magical power. This was the driving force behind magic. Normally, intelligent beings were fossilized, and those fossils were processed into magical wellsprings, generating a kind of fossil fuel. Thus, the remains of Arthur Gaz, the man ruling the leading power in magic advancement and said to possess the greatest mind in the entire country of Verbist, had the potential to be processed into a wellspring of magical power beyond compare. Also, there were quite a few times where the amount and quality of the magic used could increase the monetary value of an item exponentially.

In other words, the heroes who had directly finished off Emperor Gaz divided his body up among themselves as “treasure.”

Of course, this was not made public. Officially, it was proclaimed that the heroes' battle had concluded with Gaz's body being incinerated in an explosion, leaving nothing behind.

Those unfamiliar with the legend of Emperor Gaz might ask why the governing powers of the world went as far as to cover up the truth. One theory was that they may have simply been frightened by the man. He was the Demon King, after all, said to have possessed inhuman qualities.

At any rate...

“But it's not like they're going to just up and give them to us,” muttered Tohru as if it were a complete nuisance.

That was to say, each of the heroes had kept victory spoils for themselves that should have been seized and shared among the entire allied forces. There was no way that anyone would admit to owning one.

“To begin with, do we even know who has them?”

“...” Chaika just shook her head.

“Well, there’s our main problem right there.” Tohru felt a burden of exhaustion weighing down on his shoulders.

Even though it was said that the heroes were the ones who finished off Emperor Gaz directly, that didn’t mean that their identities had been revealed, and a word like “directly” could have many meanings—there could have been others that came into confrontation with Gaz in the same spot, like wizards supporting them from the side, or those that dealt with any retainers who may have tried to come to his aide.

On top of that, the allied forces were originally the ones to subjugate the Gaz Empire, meaning that there were also countries who, in regard to postwar land distribution, diluted the moniker “hero” by spreading around the idea that the knights of their armies were the real heroes. They made farfetched arguments like “because our knights are the real heroes, we should have the rights to the majority of the land.”

The general consensus was that the ones who fought directly with Emperor Gaz in the final battle were an eight-man special attack unit, but their names were not released, as doing so would throw a wrench into the allied countries’ plans. In the case of the count back at Del Solant, there may have been rumors that he was one of them, but there was no way for the average commoner to actually confirm whether it was true.

“However. Information, can acquire.”

“Huh? You know someone that can give us info? Who?”

“To you, a stranger.”

“...” Tohru raised his eyebrows at that.

Listening closely to Chaika’s story, apparently a mysterious person would just coincidentally appear in front of her on occasion to give her information on the owners of the remains.

But who in the world could that be? And what benefit could they possibly get out of disclosing that information?

“Are they one of those ‘people plotting to revive the Gaz Empire’ that that cavalier was talking about?”

The cavalier had mentioned something about there being people out there that wished to revive the Gaz Empire by naming a successor—in other words, people that wanted to put Chaika up on the throne as his daughter, but...

“?” Chaika just tilted her head.

She seemed to have no idea what he was talking about. Maybe she just hadn’t listened very closely to what the cavalier had said...but that was beside the point.

“It seems fishy to me,” Akari said, folding her arms.

Not only would that person have to be able to disclose things not known to the general public, but they would also have to know about Chaika’s lineage. That meant their information-gathering skills and mobility had to be top-notch.

But if someone like that did exist...then why on earth did Chaika act like she was going around looking for the remains all by herself?

As he saw it, the only way she had been able to even survive until now was that he and his sister were there. There was a very real possibility that she could have died on that mountain out in Del Solant, or perhaps been captured and killed by the cavalier’s group chasing her, apprehending her as a “dangerous existence.” If they really did want to revive the Gaz Empire by putting Chaika up as its successor, Tohru thought that was a pretty stupid plan.

“And what are you going to do after you collect the remains?”

He knew that her goal was to collect the remains of Arthur Gaz, but he didn’t know specifically why, nor did he know what she planned to do afterwards. Did she intend to revive the Empire after all? Or maybe take revenge against the people of the allied forces?

Or maybe even—

“Pay respects.”

Chaika said it clearly and definitively.

“A...Ah. So that’s it, huh.” Tohru nodded, understanding at last.

It appeared that grandiose concepts like “empire”, “emperor” and “princess” had thrown him off, and he had merely read too much into both the gathering of the remains and what would happen afterwards. He figured there was some underlying plan behind it all.

Yet this girl wanted nothing more than to give her father a proper burial. It was a completely natural desire.

Titles like “Demon King” and “princess” didn’t matter to her. Because first and foremost, they were family.

But even so...

“But even if it’s only for something like that...there’s no way they’ll let us have them.”

“...?”

As previously mentioned, the remains of Emperor Gaz were not only an incredibly powerful source of magical energy, but could also be viewed as a symbol of what the Gaz Empire had been. In other words, if someone was to gather all the pieces, they could be granted power worthy of becoming the Emperor’s successor—and they would be able to let the whole world know it, too.

At least, that was what had had that cavalier and his group shaking in their boots.

Though the Gaz Empire had been pronounced destroyed, it had been the major power ruling the north for several hundred years. There had to be millions of people left who would be interested in that kind of power, and there were undoubtedly those among them who still aimed for the revival of the Gaz Empire even today.

“Hey, do you...” Tohru began with an incredulous look on his face. “You don’t understand the insane scale of the mess we’re getting caught up in here, do you?”

“...?”

It seemed that Chaika herself was completely unaware of it. It was just as she

had said—the only goal she had was to “give her father a proper burial”, and she would not stray from her goal, no matter what. *But that’s an awfully risky way of thinking*, Tohru thought.

Brandishing such pure-hearted, genuine emotions made one an easy target of manipulation by others.

“Father’s remains, gather. That’s all. After that, my future...begin,” she said.

Come to think of it, she was saying something like that a few days ago, too. Something like, five years ago when her empire had fallen, time froze for her—and that, as long as she was stuck in the past, she wouldn’t be able to face the future.

Tohru knew the feeling.

Though it was a bit different for him...he, too, felt like he was bound by his past.

“Actually...come to think of it, why did the Gaz Empire fall, anyway?” Tohru asked, crossing his arms.

Truthfully, because Tohru had been training in the Acura village day after day, it was only after the war that he had ever departed. He had heard of general goings-on in the world by way of the occasional traveling merchant or villager returning home, but when it came to the detailed circumstances surrounding each country, he was completely lost.

“Good grief, Nii-sama, your complete ignorance of the world around you really is troubling.” Akari made an over-exaggerated shake of her head.

To compensate for her lack of facial expressions, she would often use blatantly obvious, overly pronounced hand and body gestures to make it clear what she was feeling. Even though Tohru was used to this behavior by now, it still irritated him.

“Well, excuse me.”

“But, that’s also kind of hot.” She gripped her fist tightly.

“Okay, now you can shut up,” Tohru groaned. “And by the way, you say I’m ignorant of the world, but aren’t you basically the same?”

Just like Tohru, Akari also shouldn't have had any chance to leave the village before its demise. So, it stood to reason that she wouldn't know anything Tohru didn't. But...

"I'm a woman, though," Akari said, thrusting out her chest. By the way, compared to Chaika's, her chest was far and away more developed. On top of that, she was wearing tight-fitting clothes that accentuated the lines of her body, emphasizing that part of her even more. "And being a woman is a weapon in and of itself."

"Huh?"

"Back in Del Solant, while you were holed up in the house, lazing around day after day, I was utilizing my weapon to gather information around the area."

"Wait, by 'your weapon', you mean that you..."

As saboteurs, Tohru and Akari were well-versed in underground operations—in other words, subversive activities like information acquisition and manipulation, assassination, riling up the enemy...things that the men on the front lines would never engage in. Though the two of them had never been in an actual battle, that was the way that they had been raised.

Thus, it stood to reason that female saboteurs were taught to use their body in other ways, like techniques for seducing high-ranking officials by dressing as a harlot, infiltrating their ranks in the process.

Akari's body *was* the best out of all the other female saboteurs, but...Tohru had been under the strong impression that she'd always been engrossed in martial arts training when she had been with the men.

"When did you...?"

Somehow, he just couldn't believe that the men of the village had taught her ways to gather information in the bedroom. But then again, she was a female saboteur, so it wouldn't have been that unusual if they had.

"It's exactly as you're thinking—"

She announced it with absolutely no hint of bashfulness—actually, she seemed quite proud of it.

“I just heard about it in passing.”

“...You know, going around making people think that’s the way you gather info could be bad for your morals in all sorts of ways.”

“Hearing you say that gives me no greater pleasure.”

“It wasn’t a compliment!” yelled Tohru.

“But Nii-sama. You really shouldn’t underestimate the information network of the world’s women. There was no need to mingle with the men.”

“But it’s all gossip. No matter how much you have, if it’s not confirmed to be true, then what’s the point?”

“No, Nii-sama. It’s precisely because it’s dubious that it could be useful in large quantities. Accumulate enough gossip, and we start to get an outline of the bigger picture. You’ve learned that as well, have you not?”

...Well, it *was* true that there was no smoke without a fire.

No matter how baseless or half-baked the rumors were, they had to be based on some grain of truth, which meant that regardless of how distorted the truth had become, there had to be a common thread running through each bit of gossip. After the embellishments were pared down, some pretty worthwhile info could be obtained.

“Anyway...it seems that in general, Emperor Gaz was regarded as the root of all evil in Verbist, and he was overthrown,” said Akari.

“Come on, I know that much at least. What I don’t understand is why the Gaz Empire was the only one to fall. It was a period of war, so it should have been a free-for-all, right?”

“It seems that the very existence of the Gaz Empire was what kicked off the warring period in the first place.”

“Huh?” Tohru raised his eyebrows at that.

“After all, it was the development of magic that caused the war to escalate.”

“Ah, so it was because of large-scale magical advancements in communication and transportation and stuff?”

Magic could actually be used for a variety of things, both large-scale and small-scale. An individual could use it for something as basic as wielding a Gundo, whereas a group of people could use it for grander purposes, like making a huge fortress-like object float in the air, or communicating across distances that would normally require days of vehicular travel to traverse. Magic was actually a pretty big deal.

Taking that into account, the majority of modern magic was brought forth from the Gaz Empire. To be precise, before the Gaz Empire's reign, magic was an impractical chore that required a great deal of time and effort to activate, but with Emperor Arthur Gaz in charge, some incredible developments in magical technology came about, like Gundo and related weaponry. It was for this reason that, along with his two fear-inducing nicknames of "Taboo Emperor" and "Demon King", he was at the same time also lauded with such titles as "Genius Emperor" and "Great Sage." Without the Gaz Empire's magic tech, it was likely that the culture and civilization of the continent of Verbist would have been far less advanced.

However...

"The enrichment of their communication and transportation ability naturally got each country thinking about expanding their territories. There simply hadn't been a reason before to think about expansion without having the means for which to expand. Put another way, you could say that it was a matter of "one can only rule what one can reach."

"...Well, I more or less get it now," said Tohru, shrugging his shoulders. "But don't you think that reasoning is a bit forced?"

Sure, the magic tech that the Gaz Empire had brought about had certainly played a part in fanning the flames of war, but he felt that definitively declaring the Gaz Empire the "root of all evil" was a bit much. After all, the allied forces had been the one to utilize that technology as an instrument of war. Tohru felt that the blood of the innocents was solely on their hands, since they were the ones wielding the weapons that killed them. Claiming the manufacturer was at fault for the misuse of the product was as ridiculous as blaming the blacksmith for the misuse of a sword.

“I agree, it is a bit much.” Akari nodded. “But, in a nutshell, that’s what society has come to believe.”

“Hm.”

Regardless, it was highly unlikely that the cavalier and his group were pursuing Chaika out of affectation or merely on a whim. Those guys were dispatched because someone, somewhere, felt that she was a real threat.

“...So that’s the situation, huh.”

The circumstances of the fallen empire aside, though, the more pressing matter was currently the issue of guaranteeing their own safety.

“I wonder how far away we are from that dangerous bunch now.”

The image of the group in pursuit of Chaika, and, in particular, the young cavalier who had displayed such incredible skill, flashed through Tohru’s mind, and he heaved a gloomy sigh.

Part 3

The Postwar Reconstruction Implementation Agency, Kleeman.

Although it was the only one of its kind on the continent of Verbist, it was no exaggeration to say that it was a super-organization dedicated to its cause. It was a unique organization that had been founded by a number of countries who had pooled their resources and brought over some of their best men in an effort to collaborate.

However, while the organization was certainly grandiose in title and pedigree, the truth was that when it came to facilities and personnel, it was anything but.

To be honest, the organization really wasn't made up of much more than leftovers from the collaborative effort to take down the Gaz Empire. And truthfully, most of the ruling powers all had their hands full with the postwar reshuffling of their infrastructure, and would push forth the excuse that they should just focus on their own territories for the time being. To put it bluntly, the agency was just a way for them to display to the public that they weren't just resting on their laurels.

No personnel, no funds, and no real power. These three telltale signs of a weak organization were the true face of Kleeman.

As for these "best men" that were sent from the countries, the people who were dismissively selected were talented in their own right, but were just a bit... off to be considered normal—including, for instance, Konrad's female aide, Karen Bombardier.

"I've received Gillette Corps' report on making contact with *her*."

No sooner had the man in charge of Kleeman, Konrad Steinmetz, returned to his office after a brief smoke break out in the courtyard, than Karen had given him this information.

"'Her'?"

"Chaika Gaz," she said in a matter-of-fact tone, pushing up the glasses on her

face with one finger and looking positively high-strung.

On the surface, she seemed like a rather strict middle-aged woman, and in fact, she was indeed a stickler for the rules. She was quite skilled at office work, but she was one of those that acted like because something was possible for her, anyone should be able to do it; so, for all intents and purposes, she was quite difficult to be around. Because of that, though, she also considered things beyond her to be beyond everyone else.

In her hands was a sheaf of documents. This was probably a copy of the aforementioned report that Gillette Corps had sent.

“The Demon King’s daughter, huh,” said Konrad as he passed by Karen, making his way to his desk.

“...”

Karen wrinkled her nose a bit at the tobacco smell coming from him, but she didn’t say anything about it. The decision—or rather, order—that smoking in the office was prohibited had been hers. She was of the opinion that it killed efficiency in the workplace and it made the room smell awful. Konrad had begrudgingly conceded, but even Karen probably understood that smoking outside was his compromise. If he had been ordered to quit smoking completely, then efficacy and performance be damned, he would put the entire facility on hold.

“That got here faster than expected,” said Konrad. Now sitting at his desk, he began to examine the pages. “I sure as hell hope this one is the real deal,” he added, emitting something sounding like a low groan.

The “Taboo Emperor” Arthur Gaz’s daughter, Chaika Gaz. Actually, Gillette Corps wasn’t the only group that was searching for her; there were two other groups in Kleeman who were also on the hunt. Time and time again Konrad had received similar reports from these groups that the Demon King’s daughter had finally been found, but those reports had all been false. Every time they “caught” her, she would turn out to be an impostor.

In the first place, it wasn’t until after the war that anyone had ever even heard of Arthur Gaz having a daughter. While the war was still raging, there was no indication that the “Taboo Emperor” had any blood relatives at all. So, from

the beginning, the information that Arthur Gaz had a daughter was highly suspect.

But even so, or actually, because of that very fact, amidst all the postwar confusion, there were idiots who falsified Gaz's lineage and claimed that they were the princess of the Gaz Empire, and though they were captured time and time again, they just kept on coming. It was true that because the Gaz Empire had fallen, there was no way real way to check and see if they were the real thing, but of all the people out there to impersonate, Konrad had no clue why someone would even want to claim themselves as one of the Taboo Emperor's relatives.

"It looks like she had some help."

"Oh, so they intend to deceive us with a group scam again?" Konrad said disgustedly as he thumbed through the pages.

All the cases up until now had been the same: people craftily trying to wheedle their way out of paying whatever debt they owed to merchant or to their count by pledging to "bring about the dawn anew and resurrect the Gaz Empire" or somesuch other bull. It wasn't always the resurrection of the empire; sometimes, it was that Arthur Gaz supposedly gathered his assets in a hidden place, and this was their attempt to find it.

At any rate, in the majority of cases, there was a group of people involved to make it seem more credible. There was no way anyone would believe that a princess who no one even thought existed would just show up out of nowhere one day, so they had to put on a performance to deceive their detractors. For that purpose, there had to be some "supporting actors" in the mix as well.

"Apparently, they fought with Gillette Corps," Karen stated coldly.

"..."

Konrad, in the middle of arranging the documents, stopped. Furrowing his brows, he looked up at his aide, urging her to continue. "And?"

"It seems that Chaika Gaz hired two helpers while in Del Solant. A young boy and girl. Their lineage is as of yet unclear, but...the two that Chaika Gaz hired fought with Gillette Corps, and apparently, in the end Gillette Corps was forced

to retreat from the two under Chaika Gaz.”

“That report was directly from Gillette’s group?”

“Yes.”

“...Huh.”

Aside from the corps leader Gillette, the rest of the team was quite the mishmash of professions, but each of them was incredibly skilled, and were especially frighteningly good in combat situations. Yet, against these two, they actually felt the need to engage in battle, and what’s more, had to retreat?

Clearly, this boy-and-girl team were not your run-of-the-mill citizens.

They must be mercenaries, or maybe even saboteurs. At any rate, they were the kind of people that didn’t need to resort to your everyday swindling techniques. After all, though it was only informally, a cavalier had felt the need to retreat from his post. At the very least, there was no public organization backing the two up, and this time, there were no con artists going out of their way to do whatever they pleased.

Which meant...

“Then, it’s the real thing?”

“We can’t say for sure yet,” said Karen. He knew that one of the things that Karen hated most in the world was being uncertain. “According to Gillette Corps’ report, the group in question stole the piece of Arthur Gaz’s corpse that Roberto was holding, and promptly escaped with it.”

Of course, the possibility that one of the people out there calling themselves “Chaika Gaz” was actually the real one was not zero. In fact, that was the reason that Gillette Corps and the rest were out on duty—because they had anticipated this worst-case scenario.

“We need to confirm whether or not it’s her.”

“Currently Gillette Corps are in hot pursuit of the girl,” Karen said as she flipped the pages. “Your orders, sir?”

Konrad knew that that question meant “Should we give the order to continue pursuit, or should we have Gillette Corps fall back and reconvene with another

unit?”

But...

“It doesn’t really matter,” Konrad said, dropping his gaze to the sheaf of documents once more. “We won’t know whether she’s the real one or not until we capture her, anyway. Regardless of whether she’s real or fake, though, the fact remains that the very possibility the Demon King’s daughter does exist would make anyone uneasy. Our original objective remains unchanged. We’ll continue with the current pursuit. Once we’ve successfully apprehended her, we can confirm her authenticity for ourselves. We can then decide how to proceed from there.”

“Understood,” Karen nodded. That nod must have signified that she wholeheartedly agreed with his assessment.

“Well then, I’ll prepare a wizard so we can inform them of our decision.”

And with that, the issue of “Gillette Corps in pursuit of the Demon King’s daughter” had been resolved, for now.

The Postwar Reconstruction Implementation Agency, Kleeman.

An organization in part born out of the negligence of the ruling powers. They were always understaffed and overworked, and they still had a mountain of issues to conquer. The documents pending approval were always piling up, and so was the workload.

Konrad and Karen solemnly began work on the next item on the agenda.

*

Beneath his feet, he could hear the rumble of the vehicle’s wheels rolling over the dirt.

It was early afternoon, and the horse-drawn caravan continued to make its way along the path. Though there were eight horses pulling the caravan, it was only moving at a pace just a bit faster than walking.

While it may have been in part because of the combined weight of the caravan and the passengers inside, the real reason was that this path was not very well-maintained. Countless rocks were strewn along the road, and if the

caravan went any faster, it would run the risk of rolling over one of them and possibly tipping over.

The responsibility of maintaining the road lay with this the count of this land... of course, this was the postwar era, so there were two possibilities: it could have been that the count was simply too busy to deal with it, or that he had died and left this land in the lurch.

In this case, it was clearly the latter.

On both sides of the road, an expanse of discolored wasteland spread out.

There was nothing else. Nothing as far as the eye could see, beyond a flat, completely empty landscape.

The scenery was easy on the eyes, sure, but the land was just so perfectly barren that it couldn't look anything but unnatural. In fact, there weren't even any plants, or anything even resembling uneven terrain. Just entirely flat land.

This had been the scene of a battlefield.

During the latter parts of the war, large-scale magical weapons were implemented. This land had fallen victim to one of those, literally razed down to the ground. There was once a town here, with a fortress belonging to the count, but there was no way anyone looking at this land would ever believe such a thing once existed. The road that ran through this town had once made it a hotbed for trade and commerce, yet the only trace that remained of it now was its name, everything from the ground up to be forgotten forevermore.

Not a single blade of grass had grown over the five years since the war's end, because the large-scale magical weapon had hardened the vast landscape into one giant mass of rock. Even if some vegetation began to take root by way of the wind scattering bird dung, there was no soft earth anywhere with which for it to prosper. The soil could probably be restored through digging irrigation ditches and regular maintenance, but there was no longer any count in the vicinity with the time to do so.

Just looking at it was depressing.

And yet...

“What *is* that?”

“Isn’t that...*you know...*”

“Wow, that’s creepy...”

He could hear everything that the passengers were whispering.

Having gotten bored of looking at the expanse of absolute nothingness, the passengers’ gazes had naturally gravitated to the other passengers on board. It was a long trip and there was nothing to really talk about, so it was only a matter of time that before they began to turn their attention to all the unknown faces in front of them.

“...”

At times like this, Tohru cursed his exceptional hearing.

He was better off not listening to all this excess noise; it put him on edge. If he put his mind to it he could just ignore them all, but it wasn’t like he didn’t understand why they were so apprehensive towards them, so he felt somewhat guilty.

Generally, this type of caravan was only used by commoners.

This model was different from the horse-drawn street carriages you’d see around town. It was specifically designed to go from town to town, or village to village. In other words, it was a model that was designated to travel long distances. Incidentally, the reason why it was only commoners that rode this type of caravan was because nobles and merchants had their own way of getting around, usually by either a horse-drawn carriage or vehicle that they owned.

But the majority of commoners rarely ever left the town or village where they lived. It would be wrong to say that they were completely self-sufficient, but their daily lives were primarily confined within the borders of the town. In fact, it wasn’t rare for people to spend their entire life without taking a single step out of their birthplace.

At the same time, that meant that anyone boarding the caravan must have had a good reason to do so, like attending someone’s funeral, visiting a distant

relative, making a pilgrimage for religious reasons, or maybe even something as simple as mere sightseeing.

But among all these passengers...there was one that was conspicuous.

Actually, maybe it would be better to say they stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Tohru.”

The passenger in question tilted her head quizzically.

Tohru thought about how great it would be if she were a complete stranger to him, but alas, it was not to be.

“What is it?” Tohru said, clearly in a sour mood.

“Face, weird.”

“...”

Narrowing his eyes, Tohru removed his gaze from the window and looked across from him, meeting the gaze of the young girl there.

It was Chaika.

Looking at her once more, she certainly was pretty. She seemed almost fragile, like a doll.

The first thing that stuck out was her long, silver hair. Her white skin was unblemished, and her violet eyes were perfectly positioned in the center of her face. Her eyes somewhat reminded him of a cat's, without any of the severity or mystery that accompanied a cat's gaze. Everything about her gave a strong impression of frailty, as though if you went and hugged her carelessly, she would break.

She was just like a snow-white porcelain doll.

She was wearing a dress that had a basic theme of black against white, which made her look even more uncanny, and blue stones in the shape of butterflies adorned both sides of her headband and around her collar, which contrasted well with the color of her eyes.

Anyway, she was cute. Way too cute.

And that was precisely why she stood out so much among all the passengers

on this caravan.

“You don’t say?” Tohru narrowed his eyes, giving her a stern glare. “And whose... face... are... you... talking... about...?” He said it word by word, as if to say, “you’d better not avoid the question, either.”

But Chaika appeared completely unfazed. Rather she pointed her thin finger directly at Tohru’s nose so brashly that there might as well have been a snapping noise.

“Tohru’s.”

“My face looks perfectly normal, so what’s the big idea behind pointing at me like that and saying ‘weird’ in front of all these people?”

“You, frowning. Everyone, staring.”

“...”

It took all he had to suppress the impulse to scream. He could feel nausea rising in the back of his throat. Tohru adopted the most subdued, dignified tone he could, because anything more than that would draw people’s attention even further.

“Chaika. First off, let’s get one thing straight.”

“Mui?”

“The strange one here is you.”

“...!?” She put both her hands up to her face in absolute shock, feeling around her cheeks, forehead, everywhere around her face, and then spoke in a quivering voice.

“Shocking truth.” She shivered like she had received the shock of her life.

“Come on, not your face.”

“...Body!?”

This time, she began patting down her body, starting with her chest, then her waist and hips and so on. At last, she gave a strange nod like she understood something.

“Future, expect much growth.”

“What does that mean?”

“Truthfully, these, pads.” She pointed to her own chest.

“Wait, really? If that’s true then just how small are your—I mean, never mind that!” Resisting the urge to cry out and make a scene, Tohru harshly whispered to her.

“It’s not your body either! By the way, don’t just divulge useless information like that!”

“Hm?”

“Ugh, why can’t you get it already? It’s your ‘luggage!’ The thing crammed up in the loft!” He pointed to Chaika’s luggage.

The caravan had seats lining its walls on both sides. Well, they were called “seats”, but they were actually just waist-high boxes attached to the walls with metal fixtures. The passengers were supposed to stuff whatever they were carrying into the boxes and sit on them.

Tohru was sitting in the very back of the passenger’s cabin, at arm’s length from Chaika, who was sitting opposite him.

At least, she was *kind of* sitting. There really wasn’t any better way to phrase her current state.

In actuality, she wasn’t sitting on anything at all. Instead, her luggage was actually taking up the space of her seat.

In other words, the coffin with the Gundo inside that Chaika carried with her. Because the coffin was in her seat, she was hanging from it, in the sitting position but practically floating in the air. Tohru had wondered if she was getting tired from doing that, but she somehow looked at peace. He hadn’t expected it, but she was able to keep her balance, reducing the burden on her knees and hips.

“Important. Indispensable. Will never abandon.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Tohru already knew that Chaika valued this coffin on the same level as her life. No, given the circumstances, she might even choose it over her life. It was

so important to her that if it wasn't close enough to her where she could see it and touch it, she flew into a panic.

But even so, there was a coffin, a box to put dead people in, in the back of the passenger's cabin. There was no way it wouldn't draw attention, and the way Chaika looked only served to further the interest of the rest of the passengers.

At first, the coachman wouldn't even let them bring it on board because it would cause all sorts of problems, naturally. But Chaika wouldn't take no for an answer, and eventually the coachman had to concede.

So of course, it was natural that the rest of the passengers, with their distrustful glances, would be asking all sorts of questions. "Who is that girl?" "What is that thing doing here?" And there were indeed some that looked visibly displeased. Riding with such a strange girl carrying an ill-omened object, how could they not be?

"What a mess..." Tohru moaned.

Of course, there was a reason Tohru's group was riding this caravan today. It was because of their pursuers: Alberic Gillette and his team.

That bunch probably had some sort of carriage or vehicle that belonged to them, and what's more, they most likely had the backing of some organization. Taking that into account, they would be able to easily catch up if Tohru's group continued to move leisurely on foot. Tohru's group had taken all sorts of different countermeasures as a result, which included taking the road less traveled and crossing through the mountains, and staying there for several days hoping that they could lose their pursuers.

However... the problem was that Chaika was tagging along, and she had no stamina to speak of. Had they continued like that, there was no way Chaika was going to be able to keep up.

So even though they knew it was conspicuous, they had decided to ride the caravan. But...

"A silver-haired girl with a coffin?"

Chaika's uniqueness and reckless disregard for lying low had naturally drawn the other passengers' attention. Even if they looked past her appearance, it was

the coffin they simply couldn't ignore. Really, it stood out to the point where she might as well have been walking around carrying a gigantic sign for her pursuers saying, "here I am!" Anyway you looked at it, Tohru thought, this was not a very smart way to go about this.

As he was mulling all this over in his head...

"What's wrong, Nii-sama?" He heard Akari's voice. "If something is troubling you, then by all means, feel free to pour your heart out to me."

"Uh, no, there's really nothing to 'pour out'..."

"Doubtless, your thoughts span deeper than the ocean and are loftier than the skies themselves, so someone of my caliber may not even be able to reach out to help. But even so..."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but you're giving me too much credit," said Tohru wearily. "Just thinking that maybe I didn't think this through enough."

More precisely, he was thinking about how spur-of-the-moment the decision had been to stick with Chaika and continue to serve under her.

"No, Nii-sama, you can't fool me," said Akari, her eyes boring straight into Tohru's.

"What would be the point of fooling you?"

"You're just concealing how you really feel. I know that my Nii-sama goes out of his way to pretend to be a careless, rude individual."

"Why would I have to go 'out of my way' to do that?"

"Because it makes you seem approachable, I would think," said Akari in a grave manner that did not fit her dialogue.

Because this girl was naturally poor at showing emotion, her facial expression stayed the same no matter what she said. Her manner of speech would be no different whether she was saying "I'm going to kill you now" or "I'm going for a walk now." As such, when she was saying ridiculous things it was frustratingly easy to misinterpret her.

"How can I put it? It's like—"

Furrowing her brow, she put her index finger up to her forehead like she was in deep thought. After a bit, she said,

“Well, frankly, it makes you seem enticing.”

“...”Tohru stared at his sister like she was the most inconsequential thing in the world.

“Ah, sorry, Nii-sama. That was actually wrong of me.” She raised her hand up as if she was making some sort of oath. “It wasn’t enticing.”

“Oh, I see.”

“It was arousing.”

“...Yeah, well, your innermost feelings aside...” groaned Tohru. He let out a sigh. “We need to focus on this situation. It sucks.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” nodded Akari. “At this rate, everyone in the caravan will get aroused.”[I literally just slammed my head on the table impulsively as I read that.]

“Will you give it a rest with the ‘arousal’!?”

“Impossible. After all, I am already completely aroused.”

“All right, just shut up!” Tohru half-yelled. “What I mean is that we’re way too conspicuous here. Get with the program already.”

“...Of course. I understand, Nii-sama. It was just a joke.”

“Really now?”

“Definitely—probably.”

“What’s with that wishy-washy response...?”

It then occurred to Tohru that perhaps even she didn’t understand what she was saying, but that was neither here nor there right now.

“Though, I’d really like to not meet up with those guys again if at all possible...”

Alberic Gillette and his subordinates. A cavalier, a mercenary, and an assassin.

In the first place, having such a rare assortment of people in the same spot or

even on the same battlefield, never mind the fact they were traveling together, was surprising in itself. However, there was absolutely no denying that their skills were top-notch.

He had managed to win while squaring off against one of them...but he wasn't confident the outcome would be the same in a second encounter.

The outcome of a match was dependent on a number of factors. This was of course true in sports and tournaments and such, but especially held true in actual combat situations. In other words, much of the outcome of a battle was up to chance. The ability to win a battle regardless of bad or good luck was the true strength of a warrior. Those who prattled on about war needing to be fought under mutually favorable conditions were naive idiots who wouldn't even last three days on the battlefield.

Thus, in real combat situations, the optimal thing would be to avoid actual combat whenever possible. If you absolutely have to fight, make sure you have some kind of trick up your sleeve to increase your chances of victory...at least, that was what Tohru had been taught. Basically, "you should only unsheathe your blade after the battle is already won."

Anyway...

"We definitely need to consider our options at the next town."

"Understood."

"Of course, we'll have to get a separate room for Chaika to sleep in. Boys and girls older than seven should not be sleeping together."

"Now wait a minute, haven't you and I been sleeping in the same room together since way back?"

"I'm your sister, so that's allowed."

"...Really now..."

"Really."

Tohru turned his gaze away from his sister, who seemed somewhat prideful now for some reason, and towards the desolate landscape, sighing once more.

"It looks like we'll need some form of mobility after all." Tohru dropped his

voice so that none of the other passengers could hear. “A horse-drawn carriage, a vehicle, anything that moves. Though I really doubt anything like a carriage would just be conveniently lying around...hey, Chaika.”

“Mui?” She blinked her eyes at Tohru’s sudden beckoning, and then leaned forward.

“Right now, you’re pretty loaded, right?”

““Loaded?””

“Like, for instance, do you have enough money for us to procure a used vehicle, or a carriage that could hold a small group?”

“Ah...affirmative,” Chaika nodded.

In truth, this girl was actually quite wealthy. As expected of a former imperial princess, he supposed. Perhaps she had made off with it during the collapse of the Empire, but she possessed a large sum of gold coins and jewelry. At any rate, they wouldn’t have to worry about travel expenses, at least for now.

They would have to be smart about how they spent it, of course; it was easy to use it all up in the blink of an eye. And being on the run meant it was all the better to have some capital. Critical moments where the use of violence would mean throwing caution to the wind could now easily be resolved. Such was the power of money.

In the long run, it would benefit them more to go after one of the older modes of travel; it would undoubtedly save them money. And they probably wouldn’t be able to just use it whenever and wherever they liked, so they wouldn’t be able to continue aimlessly like they were doing now anymore.

“What’s more,” said Tohru as he stole a furtive glance over at the coachman’s view of the caravan where the horses were taking their time, just ambling along, “carriages aside, if it’s a vehicle we’re after, then only wizards will be able to operate it.”

Vehicles could basically be thought of as giant Gundos that were specialized for movement. That meant that a wizard was required in order to make them mobile.

“If we’re comparing the ground they cover, a vehicle would be the best option. If we’re able to get one I’d much prefer a vehicle over a carriage, but if we do, Chaika, you’ll have to be the one in charge of driving it. Are you okay with that?”

“Understood. Can do.” Chaika gave an emphatic nod.

Part 4

Ipsom was basically the type of fort town you would find anywhere on the continent of Verbist.

In other words, it was structurally similar to Del Solant, the town that Tohru's group had escaped from previously. Ipsom was a bit smaller than Del Solant, and was surrounded by a forest instead of mountains, but other than that, it didn't have any real distinguishing characteristics.

After coming this far with the caravan, Tohru's group had decided to try to find an inn here to stay at for the night. There was nothing wrong with camping, but honestly, sleeping out under the stars for days at a time was really beginning to wear on them. Fortunately, there were a number of inns of all sizes located next to the market area, so they were able to secure suitable rooms.

"Well then, I'm off to search."

With that, Tohru left the inn.

This was a solo mission. He had determined that Chaika didn't need to be loitering around in public due to her conspicuousness, so he had Akari guarding her for now. It was true that Chaika was a wizard, but it was precisely because of that that she was absolutely no good in close-combat situations. If, in the worst case, she ended up coming across Gillette's group again, forget defeating them—he wasn't sure if she'd have time to even escape.

For now, we just need to avoid another encounter with them.

Even in peak condition, Tohru figured their chances of victory would be slim. Gillette had others at his disposal besides the assassin and the mercenary. In the worst case, Gillette could have even brought along a wizard of his own. If so, Gillette had all sorts of resources to secure victory. To win, Tohru's group would have to resort to surprise attacks, clever schemes, and out-of-the-box thinking.

"..."

Tohru had a veritable mountain of things to consider. Over the past few days, ever since leaving Del Solant, they had been continuously moving. So much so that they had barely had time to sit down and discuss the situation or even consider it. Even after they had made camp, Tohru and Akari had been taking turns keeping watch, meaning they each only had half as much sleep as before.

But, if they secured a vehicle, they would finally have the leeway to hold a discussion.

Above Tohru was a sign reading “Market.”

In most towns, there were parking lots in the market’s vicinity where dealers sold horse-drawn carriages, vehicles and so on. All sorts of methods of transportation could be purchased here, as well as materials to repair the ones already owned.

Since vehicles required a wizard to handle, many dealers didn’t even bother with them...comparatively, there were a surplus of those that dealt in the rudimentary horse-and-oxen-drawn carriages. The war’s end had opened the floodgates for international trade, so dealers everywhere were bustling and shops were always well-stocked.

Apparently, the market was right around the corner.

Tohru turned the corner nonchalantly, and then...

“!”

As quietly as he could muster, slowing his walking pace to match the rhythm of his heartbeat, he slipped into the shadow of a nearby stable. To tell the truth, he had wanted to kick off the ground as hard as he could and make a dive for it, but he had somehow managed to resist that impulse. In this normal city scene, moving at anything other than a normal walking pace would be immediately conspicuous. In order to not get noticed, it was better for him to adopt an unassuming face while passing through rather than flying into a panic and hiding.

“Really, now?” he moaned, keeping his back up against the wall of the stable.

He took a deep breath and began to slowly erase his presence—snuffing it out all at once, he feared, would alert his pursuers—and inched his way around the

building. The windows and doors were all open, no doubt to ensure breathability for the animals inside. However, that meant that under normal circumstances, he would be exposed from the opposite side if someone was looking from the right angle. There were groups of horses in the way, though, so Tohru surmised that he could still stay hidden.

“Shit, he’s already caught up with us.”

Tohru was looking straight ahead. Across the way was a single storehouse.

The building was flat and wide. The loading dock was open, so Tohru tried to peek in from his location. He saw rows of carriages and vehicles of all shapes and sizes. It had to be a dealer’s storehouse.

Of course, the dealer probably also owned the stable that was currently providing Tohru cover. The horses in the stable were thick and muscular, unlike horses meant to be ridden. These horses were bred [since the ‘bred’ metaphor is used below] for pulling weight.

“And one other one too... doesn’t look like the assassin girl, either.”

Two figures had emerged from out of the storehouse. He realized that one of them was walking towards his left.

It was the young blonde-haired cavalier, Alberic Gillette.

With his elegant, refined features, he certainly looked like nobility. He definitely gave the impression that he had been brought up with a silver spoon in his mouth. But, as Tohru knew, his skills with the sword were anything but ordinary. To be perfectly honest, Tohru wasn’t confident he would come out on top in a one-on-one fight.

In the same way that some horses and dogs are selectively bred...it would be fair to say that the noble families that were known for their skills in the martial arts were of a different breed entirely than that of a normal human. Their ilk had learned to grip the hilt of a blade before even learning how to walk on their own two feet. Regardless of muscle or bone structure, they had been optimized for battle through day-in-day-out martial arts training.

There was no doubt that Alberic Gillette was the descendant of a family of warriors. The blood of those who fought at the war’s inception flowed through

his veins.

But...

“...An amateur?”

Walking next to Alberic was a petite girl who looked to be in her mid-teens.

She seemed to have a somewhat composed demeanor, with azure eyes and small glasses on the bridge of her nose. She was clearly a completely different person from that assassin girl Tohru had met a few days ago...if memory served him correctly, that girl's name had been Vivi.

Of course, this girl looked completely different, but there was also the way she walked. Putting it bluntly, the way she carried herself reeked of inexperience. From just that, Tohru could tell that she didn't have a clue about the martial arts.

But... she certainly didn't look like your everyday commoner.

There was a lack of ornamentation on her clothes, but she had belts around her waist and thighs where a number of accessory bags hung. Such an appearance made Tohru think that she might be a craftsman, or maybe that she dealt with mechanical parts.

“...A wizard, maybe?”

If she was a wizard, that would certainly explain why she knew nothing of martial arts.

Judging from the speed that Alberic's group had managed to travel, it was safe to say they had a vehicle. Of course, that meant they also needed a wizard to make the vehicle move. This girl was most likely the vehicle's driver. He had heard that there were wizards without Gundo who just specialized in large magical devices.

“If I'm right... then yeah, this is bad.”

Tohru waited for them to pass, still hidden in the shade of the stable, and then breathed a sigh.

He was not so optimistic as to believe that meeting them here was a coincidence. Most likely, he and Alberic had been thinking along the same lines.

Tohru's group could no longer walk or use any sort of public caravan. Therefore, Alberic must have foreseen that Tohru's group would have to procure a means of transportation as soon as possible and had made a visit to all the dealers. Most likely he had given them descriptions of Tohru and Chaika, and asked the dealers to report back if they caught sight of anyone fitting the description. Or maybe he had just ordered them to refuse service to Tohru's group. By issuing this command under the guise of a public order, a simple commoner had no choice but to comply.

"What to do, then?"

Right now, for Tohru's group, obtaining a vehicle or carriage was of the utmost importance.

Over the past week, after going on foot and using the caravan, they had exhausted all possible options. What's more, even after using those methods Alberic's group had still caught up.

"Should we just take one by force?"

For Tohru's group, it certainly wasn't impossible.

But that would also definitely cause a disturbance, creating a trail that would lead Alberic's group right to them. Right now, Alberic's group shouldn't have been aware of Chaika's presence in this town, so if fortune favored them, maybe Alberic's group would just head off in another direction and pass them by.

"No. We're just going to have to postpone getting one."

After re-confirming the direction that Alberic and that girl headed off in, Tohru bolted off in the opposite direction. Fleeing was quite the departure from his original plan, but it was the only way he would make it back to the inn quickly.

"Right now, we've got to get out of that inn!"

He didn't know how many were actually in Alberic's group. All he knew of were Alberic's two comrades: the giant mercenary and the girl assassin. It would make sense if they were acting as a unit detached from Alberic himself, investigating the inns. The mercenary, whom Tohru recalled was named

Nikolay, had most likely not yet recovered from the wounds he received in their battle; however, with the possibility that there could be someone out there that Tohru didn't even know about yet, he couldn't help but think that Akari alone would be insufficient to protect Chaika.

"...Shit!"

Tohru ran, making his way through the back alleys, lying as low as he could.

He was in a hurry.

And that was probably why...he failed to notice the boy's presence.

"Yo."

The boy spoke up leisurely as Tohru zoomed past him in the narrow alley.

"You don't have to be in such a rush. Chaika Gaz is safe, for now."

"!?"

In the next instant, Tohru kicked off the ground and pivoted, his heel scraping across the ground as he landed, killing his momentum. Assuming the battle position, he was ready at a moment's notice to grab both short swords out of their scabbards hanging from his mantle.

"..."

Who had that been? No, what had that been?

The boy who had been there just a moment ago was gone.

Or, at the very least, he could no longer feel the boy's presence.

People who used techniques to control their presence could completely erase it by blending into the scenery, to the point where you wouldn't be able to notice them even if you were looking right at them. In a way, it was similar to what Tohru had done earlier where he had carefully erased his own presence. But...

He...

If he was using techniques to control his presence, he was damn good at it. Even though the boy seemed to be in front of him, the presence Tohru could sense was paper-thin. Even staring straight at it, he could not tell where the boy

actually was.

He didn't look like a commoner. In fact, he had more of a refined, noble look about him. He seemed to be about in his mid-teens, about the same age as Chaika. He looked like he was on the cusp of growing into a man, so some boyish features still remained. His flaxen hair and amber eyes accentuated his handsome face. Yet, something about it seemed uncanny.

It was almost like he was a puppet, certainly looking the part of human, but lacking something necessary. If Tohru had to say what, it was that he seemed too clean. He didn't "smell" of humanity.

"Oho?" At Tohru's kneejerk reaction, the boy turned to look at him and issued a light laugh. "My bad. I didn't intend to scare you."

"..." Tohru stayed silent.

Who the hell is this? No wait, before that, is he an enemy or an ally?

At the very least, the boy knew Chaika's name and her lineage. He also knew that Tohru had been tagging along with her. Otherwise he wouldn't have said what he had.

But how on earth could he have known those things?

Maybe he was another one of Alberic Gillette's subordinates. But then again, if that was the case what he was saying didn't make sense. Rather than letting Tohru know of Chaika's safety, he should have kept his mouth shut and captured her.

"Who are you?"

"Well now, that's a difficult question to answer." The boy gave a light smile. "I'm not sure I have a response that would satisfy you."

"...What?"

"Although, it would be rather inconvenient if you didn't have anything to call me by. For now, let's go with... ah, I got it. You may call me Guy."

The boy stuck out his hand as if he expected Tohru to shake it.

*

Alberic Gillette was a purebred cavalier. From the onset, the Gillette family had been known for their prowess in the martial arts, and as such, from a very young age, Alberic underwent martial arts training while simultaneously learning the fundamentals of etiquette. All his life he had unquestionably believed that one day he too would stand on the battlefield.

However...the war ended before he had the chance to experience his debut battle, so he never actually got to know real combat.

At first, it didn't really bother him. After all, he understood that the war's end would finally bring about peace. Taxation to fund the war would be a thing of the past, and the citizens could at last prosper. He knew that it was something to be celebrated.

Even when he had been deployed to the organization Kleeman under his king's orders, he viewed it as a laudable line of work, one where he could contribute to keeping the peace. At the very least, he did not subscribe to the popular belief that it was just a way for the top brass to keep face. Rather, he felt it was a blessing to work with like-minded individuals.

In that way, Alberic certainly was a cavalier, through and through.

After selecting his subordinates, he had, for better or for worse, unflinchingly devoted his whole being to his duty. As expected of a cavalier, he had smothered any doubts or uncertainties he may have harbored, replacing them instead with unbridled pride and dignity.

But...

"War's fine with me. You're telling me you wouldn't want to go back to that era of chaos?"

Ever since the day of that encounter, those words had stuck in his head. He was unable to shake them off.

At the time he had simply thought, What in the world is he talking about? He absolutely could not believe that there were people out there who would actually take issue with the fact that peace had finally come after all these years.

But now...it had suddenly occurred to him that he and the saboteur might

actually be the same.

Though their morals, position and upbringing were of course different, they too had probably had their minds and bodies forged to be warriors since birth. It was probably no exaggeration to say their sole purpose in life was the battlefield itself.

But...the war was now over. What's more, he had heard that all the saboteurs' villages had been razed to the ground by cautious statesmen under the pretense that they would surely incite rebellion through dirty schemes and the like. At that time, the saboteurs, too, must have been in denial that everything they had worked for had all now been rendered useless.

No, it wasn't just cavaliers and saboteurs. There were many out there who must have felt that way. After all, the war had gone on for hundreds of years. There had to be people whose very livelihood and futures hinged on war; whose path in life became unclear after that was suddenly snatched away from them.

Right now, Alberic was on the statesmen's side, the one with authority and capital.

But what would he have done if that wasn't the case?

Alberic mulled it over as he walked.

"Gillette-sama."

"Hm? What is it?"

Hearing a voice from beside him, he turned to look at the person there.

Alberic's group, having finished their visits to all the dealers, were now walking along the town street, on their way back to where they had parked their large-model "April" vehicle.

Surveying his surroundings once more, the streets were bustling; he could see booths and stalls scattered here and there. This place sure seemed lively... seeing that, he reasserted in his head that this was a case-in-point example of the benefits peace had wrought.

"What's wrong? You look like you're deep in thought," the petite, glasses-

wearing girl next to him asked.

Zita Brusasco. One of Gillette Corps' skilled wizards.

"Oh, no, it's no big deal." Alberic forced a small smile. "What's more pressing is that at this point we've done a basic sweep of the town."

They had now walked around the entire town. This past week, Chaika Gaz and the saboteurs that were supposedly helping her had been heading toward this town using some form of transportation, either on foot or perhaps riding a caravan, and had finally ended up here. For that reason, Alberic had visited every single one of the dealers that sold any wheels, whether they be horse-and-oxen-drawn carriages or vehicles, and pressed them for information. However, there was no indication that they had purchased anything. In the meantime, he had left them each with personal descriptions of Chaika and the others on the off-chance that they would show up trying to purchase one, and told them to contact the Kleeman organization at once if they did.

In other words, those three were trapped for now.

Now they just had to wait for them to show up...was what Alberic had thought, but...

"Your opinion, Zita? You don't think we could have overlooked something, do you?"

"Hmm, let's see..." Zita tilted her head. "I don't know anything about horse-drawn-carriages, but as for vehicles, it could have something to do with the fact that we didn't investigate the stalls selling individual vehicle parts. Though, of course, they probably aren't capable of assembling a whole vehicle by themselves, and even if they were, they couldn't do it in such a short amount of time. Not to mention, they'd need some sort of workshop..."

As previously stated, this girl was a wizard.

However, her fundamental abilities as a wizard, including her magic aptitude and acuity, were less than average. Mattheus, who was also in Gillette Corps, actually had a higher aptitude for magic than she did.

But when it came to the handling, setup and maintenance of Gundo, vehicles, and other magical devices, it was a different story.

On top of being a wizard, the girl was also an engineer, versed in all sorts of mechanical knowledge. In fact, her sole strength as a wizard happened to be expertise in handling, setup, and maintenance of Gundo and similar devices. Furthermore, because those devices included comblades, she was an indispensable asset to Gillette Corps even though she had no actual combat ability to speak of.

“Barring the possibility that the dealers lied to us, or they simply betrayed us after having been bribed or taken hostage or something like that, we’ve completely sealed off the Demon King’s daughter’s means of escape...but if she has accomplices, they could have gotten someone on the outside to prepare a vehicle, and then gone to meet them.”

“Right now, there doesn’t seem to be anyone other than those saboteurs helping her, though.”

“However,” Zita frowned, “a fundamental question remains. How in the world did that girl manage to survive these past five years?”

“...”

To be honest, Alberic had been wondering about that, too.

At the time of Arthur Gaz’s subjugation, the allied forces’ armies had surrounded the imperial capital and stormed the castle. There should have been literally zero openings. In the midst of all of that, how on earth did Chaika Gaz manage to escape and survive for five whole years? Chaika looked like she was in her mid-teens. If that was true, then she would have had to have been at most ten when she escaped. No matter how resilient or powerful she was, a ten-year-old girl shouldering all of that by herself, managing to survive and stay hidden even with that ridiculously unique appearance, and avoiding any human traffickers to boot, was incredibly hard to imagine.

She must have had help along the way. But if so, where were they now?

Perhaps they perished along the way. Or maybe they simply abandoned her.

“Well, this is all based on the assumption that she’s the real Chaika Gaz, though,” Zita said.

Of course, Alberic knew that there were plenty of fakes out there

masquerading as “Chaika Gaz.”

The assertion that Arthur Gaz actually had a daughter was dubious to begin with. Though he was known around the whole continent as the “Taboo Emperor,” almost nothing was actually known about his private life. Basic facts like where he was born or whether he had any family at all were shrouded in mystery. There were no existing records of there ever being an empress, either.

“I do get the feeling that something’s off about all this,” Zita said.

“You mean that the girl might be a fake?”

“Not quite that. More like... there’s something major that we’re misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding... huh.” Alberic folded his arms.

A major misunderstanding.

Right and wrong. Good and evil. The holy and the wicked. Light and shadow. Fire and water.

Though they were polar opposites, when compared together they were, in a way, very alike.

For that reason, a simple misunderstanding could make one lose sight of something’s true nature.

“It very well could be.”

The image of that girl calling herself “Chaika Gaz” flashed through his mind.

A silver-haired girl, elegant and ephemeral.

He remembered what he had told that saboteur, but to be perfectly honest, it was hard even for him to imagine that girl as the successor to the Demon King. But then again, she was a complete enigma.

Her appearance aside, he got the strange feeling there was some larger force at work... that getting tangled up in all this was part of someone’s plan. But whose? And to what end? He didn’t know.

“ ... ”

The face of that saboteur now flashed through his mind once again.

For this earnest, upstanding, noble cavalier, this would be the first time that he'd harbor feelings of doubt towards his duty. It would, of course, be a while until those feelings were to manifest clearly.

Part 5

Tohru felt an unpleasant sweat run down his back.

Who the hell is this boy?

In front of him was the boy that called himself Guy. He had his hand stuck out to Tohru, as if expecting a handshake.

Tohru didn't sense any hostility from him; on the contrary, he was smiling amicably. Just from looking at his body, Tohru could tell that he was a complete amateur when it came to combat. His muscles and bones, still on the cusp of maturity, gave off a sense of frailty. His appearance was neither grim nor severe, so he didn't seem at all like a threat. And yet...

I'm...

Tohru was scared of him.

That was because even though they were face-to-face, Tohru couldn't feel the boy's presence. No, that wasn't quite right... there was a presence, but it was almost otherworldly; it was certainly not human.

As a saboteur whose mind was always on battle, Tohru had a certain habit. Whenever he met someone new, he unconsciously went through a process in his head. He would first evaluate how they breathed, and then he would look for any openings in their defenses, determining whether or not he could take them. It didn't even matter if the opponent's strength happened to surpass his own. No matter how seasoned a warrior someone was, one good surprise attack would be enough to end their life. Going by the logic that one could win the battle by bringing their opponent's guard down, it was better to think of ways to catch your opponent unawares rather than direct confrontation.

In other words, save the actual combat for last, and get a plan of attack in your head from the get-go. That was how he normally went about things, but...

...I can't tell...

Tohru was unable to get a good read on him. It was as if he was looking at water or air that had merely taken the shape of a person... he was unsure that he could even reach out and grab this boy called Guy.

What Tohru did know was that this was the first time he had come across anything like this.

Anxiety swelled up inside him.

Guy took one step closer, his hand still outstretched.

“I am—”

“...!”

Before Tohru even realized it himself, he had unsheathed his right short sword and attacked. Taking a step forward, he had used the unsheathing motion to accelerate the blade, slicing a splendid trajectory from Guy’s flank to his right shoulder. It was an attack that even Tohru had to pat himself on the back for; an average person’s flank would have been torn asunder, leaving nothing for them but certain death. An expert in combat might have been able to block it in time, but even so, they would surely have a hard time evading.

A fatal attack that didn’t leave any room for questioning, and quite an overbearing attack to send towards someone he had just met, whose alignment was, at best, unclear. If anyone asked Tohru at this point if he had gone off the deep end, he felt that he would have nothing to respond to that with. It had been a kneejerk reaction out of fear of the unknown.

But just then... Tohru lost his balance. All the excess force put into that attack had sent him reeling.

Because the blade had merely sliced the air.

He had definitely sent an attack towards the boy... no, he had even seen the blade cut into the boy’s body with his own eyes. Yet the boy’s figure was no longer there... it had vanished, like an illusion.

Perhaps what Tohru had seen the blade cut into... had merely been the boy’s afterimage.

“...Ridiculous.”

Tohru now felt an otherworldly presence at his back, and turned around.

Guy was standing... right there.

Without a sound, without breaking a sweat, he stood there as if he had been there all along.

Impossible. How?

Increasing your speed to the point where you leave behind an afterimage... that part was actually feasible. Tohru himself could do it while in his form that explosively increased his physical capabilities, "Iron-Blood Transformation."

But... that was only while moving in a straight line. Moving at that speed while circling around your opponent, accelerating and decelerating on a dime like he did... that violated the laws of physics. He should have fallen over, like a horse-drawn carriage or vehicle tips over after trying to take a turn without slowing down.

Yet Guy had done it. Casually, and in this narrow alley, no less.

"Uh-uh." Guy chuckled. "That's my line. What do you think you're doing all of a sudden?"

He didn't seem to have a scratch on him, nor did he seem to have any intention of boasting about evading Tohru's attack. He wasn't even on guard for another... actually, he looked like he was enjoying himself as he looked Tohru over.

"Did something I said hit a nerve, perhaps?"

"What?"

"If so, it looks like that girl really has picked up something nice."

By "that girl", he probably meant Chaika. So he was referring to Tohru like he was some kind of object...

"Oh yeah. You wanted to know what I am, right?" Guy said with an impish grin. "Let's see... putting it in a way you'd understand, I'm an ally of Chaika Gaz. And if that isn't good enough for you, you could think of me as someone who has very high expectations for the path she will take."

“You’re shitting me,” Tohru growled. “Ally, huh? If she has an ‘ally’ like you, then why did Chaika have to come to us for help?”

But as soon as that was out of his mouth...

Wait, maybe it’s possible?

Just then, Tohru remembered something. This “Guy” might be the information dealer Chaika was talking about.

“Sorry, but unfortunately, I can’t give her any direct help. The information I have is the only help I can give. Also, I can only help Chaika and you two, her comrades.”

“...” Tohru glared at Guy, narrowing his eyes.

Only able to supply information and not help with anything else.

That didn’t sound at all like an ‘ally’. Rather, it sounded like...

This guy’s just trying to manipulate us as he pleases.

Tohru knew that although there were those who legitimately wished for the revival of the Gaz Empire, there were probably others among them that didn’t necessarily want to bow down to Chaika as its heir. In fact, it wouldn’t be strange for some of them to aim for Chaika to take the throne so that they could make her their puppet, essentially taking the power and authority of the empire for themselves.

“And why would I believe information from someone like you?”

“You’re free to believe whatever you want; I’m just the messenger. Whether or not you accept it is completely up to you. Forcing you to take it would require some extra measures on my part.”

This boy had a cryptic way of speaking. There was no uncertainty in anything he said... he spoke as if everything had already been decided.

“Then, if you’re not against us...” Tohru returned his sword to its sheath.

“Why did you appear before me?”

“You just looked like you needed some assistance. You do, right?” Guy gave a light laugh.

“...Huh?”

“You’re in need of some wheels, no?”

“ ... ”

That was indeed true. But...

“You have something we can use?”

“Oh, no, no. I told you already, I’m merely the messenger.” Guy gave an exaggerated shake of his head.

Then, turning away from Tohru and narrowing his eyes ever so slightly, he spoke again.

“After you leave this town, if you walk south for a little bit, you’ll come to a forest, correct?”

Yes, Tohru knew that there was a forest south of Ipsom. It was common sense to always have a good grasp of your surroundings, at least on the battlefield.

“In the depths of that forest, there’s a small spring. There are a number of vehicles parked along the bank of that spring.”

“...Huh?”

“Along the way to this town, you saw the ruined earth, right? Thirty years ago, a pretty big battle took place here. A number of vehicles belonging to the army were abandoned in the forest. The personnel riding the vehicles has long since fled. It looks like they were vacated in the middle of the army’s retreat, though, so they’re not in great condition. However, all of the vehicles abandoned there are the exact same model, so it should be possible to switch out the broken parts for the ones that still function. With that, surely you can repair one of them to the point where it’s up and running again?”

“ ... ”

Tohru tried to gauge the veracity of what Guy was saying.

He didn’t seem to be an enemy. At least, not for now. If he had harbored ill will toward any of them, Guy would have just attacked them directly instead of talking to him like this. He had taken Tohru by surprise; after all, he should have

been able to do the same to Akari as well. It would have been enough to secure a victory.

“Chaika...did mention something,” Tohru said, still glaring at Guy. “About a certain someone who would just appear in front of her sometimes with information on the remains. Are you him?”

“I am indeed.” Guy confirmed it with a nod. “Oh, by the way, I almost forgot. One more thing. I know the name and location of one of the heroes who were at the capital at the time of its collapse.”

Guy pointed eastward. “Some ways east from here, there’s a forest different from the one I told you about previously. Should take about two days to get there with a vehicle. The hero’s residence is within that forest.”

Tohru called up the mental map of the area in his head. “Two days...so that’s about where Raison is, huh?”

“That’s right. The hero’s name is Dominica Scoda. I would recommend going to see her after you get your vehicle.”

“Why, thank you for your generosity,” Tohru shot back, a frown on his face.

“Well then, that’s all from me.” Guy put one hand on his chest in an over-pronounced gesture...and in the next instant, he was gone.

“How the hell...? What kind of trick is he using?” Tohru asked aloud, dumbfounded.

It wasn’t a figure of speech. He really had vanished in an instant; as soon as Tohru had taken his eyes off him. As if he had never actually been there at all, he had disappeared without a single trace.

Had it been some kind of illusion? He had heard that there was magic capable of producing illusions, and knew that even without magic, there existed devices that could use a trick of the lens to create projections...but the problem was that with Guy, he had definitely felt a presence. A strange one, but a presence nonetheless.

“...What was that?”

But right now, he didn’t have the time to worry about Guy. He broke off in a

dash towards the inn once again.

*

From Ipsom, it took about three hours on foot to get to their destination.

In the end, they had to leave immediately, unable to even get one night's rest at the inn. Tohru and the others, relying only on their own two feet, had headed straight for the forest towards the spot Guy had mentioned. Of course, it wasn't that they believed every word of Guy's information, but even so, Tohru thought it'd be a pretty good place to hide from Gillette's group in the meantime.

"Huh."

In the depths, amidst the overgrown brush, there was indeed a small spring just slightly west of the middle of the forest. It really was an inconspicuous body of water; if Tohru hadn't known about it beforehand there'd be no way he'd ever find it. Perhaps due to the undercurrent there were no signs of any fish, despite the water being clear.

"I guess it really was here," Tohru said, with a bit of astonishment creeping in his voice.

On the bank just ahead of Tohru were three military vehicles, concealed by overgrown detritus.

These were different than the small and medium-sized combat vehicles Tohru had seen before. These were large vehicles most likely designed for transport, with seemingly large capacities to boot. To Tohru, they looked kind of like giant tortoises with their heads stuck out.

"Vehicle!" He heard Chaika's voice. Staring at them in amazement, Chaika selected one, opened the hatch to what must have been the driver's chamber, and stuck her legs through first so that only her torso was visible.

As Tohru was watching her...

"Nii-sama..." said Akari next to him. Her voice contained traces of suspicion. "How do you think that boy knew this was all here?"

"Well, I'm not too sure myself..."

Though he had been a bit hesitant, they really had no choice but to follow

Guy's words—he had told Akari what Guy had said along the way.

“But that cavalier's group is still in the city, so we had to leave anyway. I just thought that while we were at it, we could confirm his info for ourselves.”



“I’m appalled,” Akari said. “You mean to tell me that you decided to obey the

advice of someone who you've never met when you don't even know their background?"

"Well, when you put it like that, yeah, I guess..." Tohru shrugged.

"You didn't even stop to consider the possibility that it might be a trap?"

"If that were the case, he would have been trying to kill or torture me or something back there. Look: first of all," Tohru held up one finger, "we might not know his true nature, but I didn't sense any direct hostility from him, at least. And second of all...I'm not sure how to put it, but..."

Tohru stopped talking here. He had to think about how he was going to phrase what he said next.

"He seemed like he had his eye on something besides us, or that what I wanted and what he wanted were different...something like that. Ah, shit, I can't express it very well."

"He seemed like that, huh..." Akari tilted her head.

"Sorry I couldn't put it more eloquently."

In no way did Tohru accept this "Guy" at face value. On the contrary, he actually thought he reeked of suspicion...in fact Tohru really wanted to take him down if he could. But that was something else entirely, and for the moment Guy didn't seem to be their enemy.

It was almost like...Guy was looking at someone else's game rather than the chessboard in front of him.

"At any rate, the vehicle's here, so I guess your hunch worked out this time, Nii-sama."

The moment that Akari said that, there was a low, mechanical-sounding rumble, as if coming forth from the depths of the earth itself.

"Tohru!" Chaika's head popped out from the vehicle. "Operation, possible! Parts, must gather!"

If Guy was to be believed, it had been thirty years since these vehicles had been abandoned, and from the looks of it, the inside must have been caked with dust and grime. Chaika's white face and silver hair were speckled with grey

spots.

Although, seeing her innocent face looking like that was pretty cute.

“Sounds good.” For now, Tohru replied with a wry smile.

“Exchange of parts, require assistance!”

“Yeah, I got it. Just tell me what to do.”

With a nod to Akari, Tohru headed toward the vehicle.

They now had some “wheels.” There was no doubt that this would save them a lot of time in the long run. For now, it was best to take the circumstances surrounding Chaika one piece at a time. Then he could organize what they had later.

Thinking that, Tohru rolled up his sleeves and entered the vehicle.

Chapter 2: The Retired Paladin

Part 1

A vehicle was basically a giant Gundo.

Actually, all magical devices were simply a type of Gundo. Any device capable of simplifying the normally arduous and time-consuming process of magic could be considered as such. The design didn't have to be shaped like a wand, nor did it need to be a fixed length. Those were just the fundamentals of Gundo, in the same way that the most fundamental of tools is a stick.

"This thing's actually more of a pain than I thought," Tohru muttered as he sat, staring at the scenery in front of him.

The vehicle that Tohru's group had obtained, model "Svetrana," was furnished with a large windshield surrounding the driver's seat. If circumstances called for it they could cover the windshield with a canopy, but basically, if they wanted to look outside they were completely exposed.

While it was true that this was a vehicle designed for use by the military, this wasn't the kind that you'd want on the front lines. This was a transport vehicle; in other words, it prioritized visibility and easy boarding over defensive capabilities.

In exchange, however, the view from both the driver's seat and Tohru's aide's seat, from which he offered support, was excellent. As he crossed his legs and leaned back, he had a full view of the starry skies beyond the treetops.

They were making their way through a forest in the dead of night—normally an undesirable time for travel since it was incredibly dangerous. The path was unkempt and very seldom traveled. Charcoal, fallen trees or random debris on the road made it very possible for a vehicle to run aground or even tip over. They had a makeshift lamp, but the light it gave off was about as weak as a brazier so their vision was largely impaired.

This went without saying, but by trudging along this dark road, they meant to

get even the slightest bit of distance between them and that cavalier group led by Alberic Gillette. They had indeed obtained a set of wheels, but their opponents also had a vehicle—probably a state-of-the-art all-terrain model. If so, traveling along an easy road at a more favorable time of day would only get them caught.

Traveling at night was also more inconspicuous.

“I mean, for something called “magic”, it sure as hell doesn’t solve all our problems.”

“Strongly agree,” replied the silver-haired wizard sitting atop the driver’s seat. Despite her reply, though, she looked like she was having the time of her life compared to Tohru.

It was Chaika.

“You’re the only one who can use it out of us three...”

Vehicles were a type of Gundo, so a magic user, or “wizard,” had to be connected to its terminal to operate it. That meant that if you wanted a vehicle to move, you needed a wizard. Sure, acquiring a set of wheels was all well and good, but Chaika was the only one able to drive.

“Want to take a break?”

“...Sure.” Chaika let out a yawn, as if Tohru’s words had suddenly reminded her of just how tired she was. “Break time, break time.” She stopped the vehicle, let go of the control handle, and unplugged the connecting cord from her neck.

“Come to think of it, wizards utilize the seal engraved on them, right?” Tohru stared at the nape of Chaika’s neck.

Wizards had a pattern on the back of their neck that resembled a seal, and they used it to connect themselves to their Gundo. The connecting cord had a reversed yet identical seal on the end, and by plugging the cord into the seal on the neck, the user’s nervous system was connected to the magical device.

“Hey, let me see that for a bit.”

“...?”

“Your seal.”

“Ah...s-sure.” She seemed to be somewhat taken aback, but she nodded.

Without preamble, Tohru grabbed her hair and brusquely lifted it up to get a good look at the seal engraved on the nape of her neck.

“...”

Chaika’s face flushed red for some reason, but Tohru didn’t pay any mind to it.

“Wow, it’s awfully detailed. It looks like mine...”

Tohru also had a seal, engraved on the palm of his hand. It was a marking that allowed him to connect with his comblades.

Although magic power and blood vessels were two different things, they probably shared some common points. He wasn’t an engineer or a technician though, so the specifics were beyond his comprehension.

“You mind if I touch it?” Tohru asked, suddenly curious.

“U...Ui!?” She froze in surprise.

“Ah, is that a no?”

“O...Okay,” she said. Her face grew even redder.

“Uh, if you don’t want me to you really don’t have to force yourself...”

“It’s...fine,” she repeated, a slight conviction in her voice.

“Okay then...”

Tohru figured her seal must be more sensitive than his was. With that in mind he decided to be gentler, and softly grazed it with his index finger.

“Hyoooh!?”

“Huwah!”

Her body twitched as she let out a ridiculous yelp. In response to that, Tohru yanked his hand back instinctively and looked back at her.

“W-What was that for?”

“P-problem, none.”

So she said, but she certainly looked like she had a problem. She was all hunched up and her face was beet red, as if she was embarrassed.

Just then...

“...Dear brother.”

He heard a voice from the back.

“Ah, Akari. It’s time to switch—”

Tohru didn’t even get to finish his sentence.

Because Akari’s hammer was tracing a horizontal arc in his direction.

“Agh!?”

Having sunk down to the floor to avoid the strike, he righted himself and screamed at Akari.

“What the hell!?”

Though it hadn’t been a blow intended to kill him, that made it all the more dangerous. Tohru could instantaneously sense a strike laced with killing intent, but since it hadn’t been his dodge was a bit late.

“Why is it like this *every freaking day* with you!?”

Why was he suddenly assaulted? With Tohru’s capabilities he was able to evade, but had her target been a novice of martial arts, there would’ve been blood...no, it would’ve been an instant kill.

“‘What the hell’, you ask? That’s my line,” Akari said in a tone that was all too familiar. “What in the world does my brother think he’s trying to pull this late at night,” she looked up at the stars, “with
her

.” She pointed to Chaika with her hammer. “Dear brother, you are truly shameless.”

“Now hold on a minute, what do you mean *shameless*—”

Handling her hair, touching the nape of her neck just like that...”

“...Ah.”

Looking back on the conversation, he at last pieced it all together, and realized from an objective standpoint just what he had done.

“U-Uh, no, there was no meaning behind that.”

“I understand. Say no more, my dear brother. I know your intentions are more genuine than anyone else. After all, I know everything about you, right down to the locations of all the moles on your body.”

“When did you...!?”

“There’s a rather large one on your left thigh.”

“Why the hell do you know that!?”

“Fu hu hu.”

“Don’t laugh so emotionlessly, it’s creepy! No, before that, do you *really* understand?”

“Of course. I’ve always known that my brother’s perversion is genuine.”

“You don’t understand anything!” Tohru yelled. “It was just mere curiosity! Sure, I should have been more conscious of what I was doing, but all I did was touch her neck a little bit!”

“Well, if that had been me, I’m sure I would have gotten pregnant.”

“What do you think I am, some kind of superhuman!?”

“Don’t they say ‘clear your mind of all mundane thoughts, and you will even find fire cool?’ My heart is so filled to the brim with love for my brother, it’s an established fact that the baby would just pop out in the middle of the procedure.”

“That’s nothing to be proud of!”

“False pregnancy?” That was Chaika, who was now tilting her head, saying things that would invite even more confusion.

“I suppose you could call it that.”

“No, you can’t.” Tohru glared at his sister-by-obligation and groaned with his

eyes half shut. “The fact that you can say stuff like that that with a straight face...your values really are a mystery.”

“Women are a treasure trove of mysteries, my dear brother.”

“I think you’re the only mystery around here.” As usual, Tohru couldn’t tell whether she was honestly keen on him or just making fun of him. He sighed, a reflexive response to his confusion.

“Well, that’s neither here nor there right now.” Tohru pulled a folded sheet of paper out of an accessory case beneath his feet and spread it out. On top of the blue surface was an ovular figure, crudely drawn in black.

It was a map of the continent of Verbist.

“Since you’re up, Akari, now is probably a good time to discuss our future plans. Since we’re resting right now and all.”

“Future...?” Like a small bird, Chaika tilted her head innocently.

“Well, when we hit the next town, Raison, we’re going to have to put our escape on hold.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Chaika and Akari exchanged glances.

“Being on the run constantly won’t get us anywhere. Now that we’re confident we’ve at least bought ourselves a bit of distance between us, we should return to our original objective. Specifically—”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Chaika and Akari continued to stare at Tohru.

It didn’t seem like they were staying quiet because they were against the idea; more that they were hanging on his every word. But...

“—Wait just a minute. Hey, you.” He sent a glare over at Chaika. “You’re supposed to be our master, aren’t you? Why am

/ the one in charge!?”

“ ... ”

Chaika blinked her eyes in surprise.

“Ah. Forgot.”

“Seriously?” Tohru dropped his shoulders and groaned.

From behind, Akari placed her hand on his back as if to console him.

“Dear brother, words simply cannot express how proud I am of you right now,” Akari said to his back. Of course, there was no emotion in her voice.

“Proud? Of what?”

“You actually said something proactive for once.”

...She wasn't consoling him at all.

Well, it was true that until about half a month ago Tohru was always being torn into by his sister for being a good-for-nothing with no inkling of motivation.

“Anyway, I never asked to be the leader here!” he yelled, displaying an expression of ire.

For now, the next item on the agenda for Tohru's group was to meet with this “Dominica Scoda” person that Guy had mentioned. Guy had said that she had one of the pieces of the “remains.”

Of course, they didn't trust Guy himself at all. But, they didn't really have any other option...at the very least, it was due to his information that they had obtained the Svetrana vehicle, so Tohru guessed the probability that this information was also accurate was quite high.

But, they were neglecting to go straight to the forest as Guy had advised. They had decided to err on the side of caution first by gathering information from a nearby town, which was why they were stopping in Raison. If one of those heroes really did live in that forest, surely someone in town would have something to share about them.

“Hey, Chaika,” Tohru said in a quiet voice. “You know that depending on the circumstances, it's possible those refugees from the Gaz Empire could make you

their leader, right?”

“...Mui?” Chaika just tilted her head, like she had no idea what he was talking about.

Unless Chaika was lying, she herself had no interest in reviving the Gaz Empire.

According to her, all she wanted to do was gather her father’s remains and give him a proper burial.

Then, what was Guy hoping for by giving her this information?

There was no way it was merely out of goodwill. There had to be some ulterior motive. It’d be strange if there weren’t.

“No, wait a minute...ah, let me put it like this..” Tohru nodded, having just realized. “It’s possible that you’ll come across people who aren’t necessarily your enemies, but not necessarily your friends either.”

People could benefit from battles that weren’t their own. Making her their leader and then using her as a puppet...perhaps that’s what they were aiming for.

To begin with, even though it’d be the Empire’s resurrection, Tohru highly doubted that any of those advocates actually held any loyalty towards the “Taboo Emperor.” Anyone with any deep loyalty, like his retainers, would have been with him during the battle at the capital, and would have perished. Either that, or they would have dutifully stayed by Chaika’s side since she was his own flesh and blood.

Taking that into account...

“You...you actually have it pretty rough, don’t you,” said Tohru somberly.

“Mui...?”

As expected, she didn’t get it. Or at least that’s what her little head-tilt communicated to Tohru.

As he stared at Chaika, Akari gave a big nod.

“Indeed, having to suffer through such embarrassment due to my dear

brother's cluelessness, defenseless and—”

“I'd really like you to shut up now,” said Tohru, glaring at Akari. Then he turned his gaze back to Chaika...it seemed that she really had no self-awareness to speak of. She just sat there with her arms crossed and head tilted.

“Mumumu?”

“No, it's probably good that you don't understand.”

Was she a paragon of innocence, or was she a colossal idiot? Well, it didn't really matter which, thought Tohru.

Whether it was out of stupidity or naivety, at least Chaika always had her eyes on her goal no matter how despairing the situation. It was much better than those who made excuses to themselves through half-assed mental gymnastics. It was that earnestness that Tohru liked about Chaika.

“But, it'd be best if we at least figured out what those guys' intentions really are.”

In other words, they needed to confirm if there really were people who were aiming for the Empire's revival, as Alberic's group had suggested. He doubted that there was anyone out there who actually wanted to put Chaika up on the throne, though. On the contrary, they could use her as bait to draw out those like Alberic's group; in other words, use her as a decoy, controlling her as they pleased.

If that were true, then Guy's actions made sense.

He didn't expect anything out of Chaika as the successor to the Empire. But if she was captured and killed by Alberic's group, she wouldn't be able to fulfill her role as a decoy. On the other hand, if Guy interfered too directly Chaika's actions could be traced back to him, rendering the diversion meaningless.

And so, with the minimal amount of contact he could manage, Guy had offered up that information just so Chaika wouldn't get caught. Something like that.

But...if that really is the case...

He glanced at the coffin by her side.

Then what's the deal with the gathering of the remains?

If the worst were to happen and Chaika got captured, Arthur Gaz's remains would be turned over to the enemy...the Postwar Reconstruction Implementation Agency, Kleeman. The remains of the "Taboo Emperor" harbored great magical power within them, which could be sold for an inordinate amount of war funds, or even used directly as weapons themselves. In a wizard's hands they could be incredibly powerful. They had seen that for themselves with the count back in Del Solant.

Was it really okay to put the mission of gathering such valuable items in the hands of someone as unreliable as Chaika? What's more, even without the remains those aiming for the Empire's resurrection might have some other methods lying in wait, just for the purpose of furthering their ambitions.

Though of course, what the particulars of those methods would be, he had no idea.

"Ah, dammit. This is such a pain." Tohru scratched his head irritably. "Why do I have to get all wrapped up in this?"

He had no choice but to fret over the details.

Saboteurs engaged in work that was generally frowned upon, also known as the "dirty jobs." Because of that, they viewed right and wrong only from the perspective of the mission they were given. Whether their methods were cowardly or unfair was up to their own discretion. The way that they moved according to their own will was not that much different from a lawless heathen. No, just from their techniques alone they were probably more mean-spirited in nature than a mere bandit or thief.

"...Tohru." Chaika suddenly tugged on his sleeve.

"Hm?"

"Grateful." She gave a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Oh...you're welcome..." he said, for some reason feeling like he had lost his mental battle. Her smile was...bright.

Just as she had said, her expression was one of pure gratitude, nothing else.

Though he hadn't known her very long, he was certain that this girl's clumsiness by nature could not be faked, and that she wasn't the type of person that could cunningly manipulate using facial expressions, either.

She was, for better or for worse, completely genuine.

She probably didn't think about anything else other than collecting those remains. So she was probably truly grateful that Tohru was here to agonize over it in her place.

"Anyway," Tohru said, averting his gaze from Chaika, "according to the info we got from the information broker Chaika mentioned, there's a forest next to the town of Raison, and apparently one of the heroes carrying a piece of the remains lives in that forest. Whether or not this person actually has the remains, though, we should first confirm for ourselves."

Part 2

Gillette Corps, the division of Kleeman led by the cavalier Alberic Gillette, was in essence formed to investigate, confront, and if necessary eliminate any and all occurrences that might be detrimental to the advancement of postwar reconstruction efforts.

The group was comprised of six members: the leader Alberic Gillette; his right-hand man, the giant mercenary Nikolay Autotor; the wizards Mattheus Callaway and Zita Brusasco; assassin Vivi Holopainen, and Leonardo Stola, who was a bit of an outlier. He wasn't a cavalier, mercenary, wizard, or assassin. If you asked any of the members of Gillette Corps what category Leonardo belonged to, they would have to reply with "Leonardo's just Leonardo."

There was no one like Leonardo Stola, for better or for worse.

"...Gillette-sama."

No sooner than Alberic had completed his daily set of sword swings, he heard a voice. It was almost as if the owner of that voice had been waiting for him to finish before speaking up.

It was evening. Gillette Corps' April-model vehicle was parked in an small open space just off the road; they were taking a quick break. Everyone else was inside the vehicle. Zita was most likely resting, having had the task of driving the vehicle all this time, while Mattheus and Vivi were probably getting dinner ready. Nikolay was likely to be tending to his own wounds. Though their vehicle was state-of-the-art, it still shook quite a bit while it was in motion. Dressing and redressing wounds, as well as cooking, required precise movements that would be difficult to pull off if the vehicle wasn't parked.

"Ah, Leonardo, is it?"

Sliding his sword back into his sheath, Alberic replied to him, but he knew better than to try and search around for him. If Leonardo felt like it, Alberic could search for the rest of his life and still never be able to find him. That was his special talent, and the number one reason why he was inducted into the corps.

“Yo.” Instantly and without even a peep, the figure of a small boy appeared next to Alberic. His body looked dainty and fragile, almost like that of a woman. He had no sense of stoutness; it was the kind of body that looked like it never even excreted sweat. Sticking out from his shorts were a pair of thin, feminine-looking legs. Yet this body structure was nothing abnormal; he had deliberately kept his body down to the minimum limit of muscle so he wouldn’t stand out. Thanks to that, he wasn’t too useful in actual combat situations, but in terms of speed and stealth, he ran circles around Vivi the assassin.

But the most prominent feature of this boy’s appearance was not his femininity. It was definitely either the beastlike ears protruding from his head, or the tail poking out from his shorts.

He was a beast person, part of the race known as “demihumans.”

Naturally, their race was not an established one. These people had originally been human. Thanks to magic, their bodies had been “restructured.” They were the product of a goal to replace human capabilities with animalistic ones, increasing agility, stealth, strength, numbers, and so on. This breakthrough, of course, came from the land of the “Taboo Emperor,” the Gaz Empire, the leading power in the development of magic tech.

Yet Leonardo was not created in the Empire. The tech that the Gaz Empire developed was actually poorly regulated and ended up leaking outside to the rest of the world. From the bits and pieces of info the other countries were able to glean, they started their own research in magic tech, which led to new developments. This included research into creating demihumans.

With the advancement of this research came a number of experiments, from which many demihumans were created. At any rate, it was an age where ridiculous deeds could be glossed over if it was “for the sake of winning the war.” Alberic had heard that some truly inhuman things had taken place during those experiments. Apparently they were making modifications to Leonardo even while he was still in his mother’s womb, and so by the time he was born he already had his ears and tail.

And then came the war’s end. Basically, the countries that had birthed these “experimental weapons” now had the issue of where to put them all to deal

with. Leonardo, too, had been haphazardly tossed into Gillette Corps by the higher-ups without much thought.

“I finally caught up with you guys.”

“Sorry about that,” Alberic said. They exchanged wry smiles.

Within Gillette Corps, Mattheus and Leonardo were assigned different roles than the rest of them, like scouting ahead of the party or gathering information from a different angle. This time Alberic had tasked him with delivering their written report to Kleeman, as well as retrieving any new information they had ready. It would be simpler to communicate with them by voice through the use of magic, but...when it came to paper documents they were forced to use the postal system.

While the rest of Gillette Corps had been running around town visiting all the dealers, Leonardo had remained in Del Solant on standby to receive the new documents.

“How’d it go?”

“Oh, you know, it went. On my way to you guys I took a look at it too.” Leonardo shrugged. “The page is so blank it’s scary.”

“...I figured as much.” Alberic heaved a sigh.

Of course, this was not the first time Alberic had looked at information pertaining to Chaika Gaz. He had been given some briefing back when he had first been given the task to pursue her. But it had only included her name and distinguishing characteristics like her silver hair, violet eyes, and the fact that she carried around a coffin.

To begin with, most of the information pertaining to the Gaz Empire, from secret documents to citizen registries, was lost during its capital’s subjugation. Truthfully, the fact that the “Taboo Emperor” had a daughter named Chaika Gaz was virtually unknown, nor was there any hint of who birthed her.

“To be honest, I’m not interested in her background, but—”

There were several mysterious points regarding her that had come up in his conversation with Zita.

Just how old *was* she?

How did she survive for these past five years?

And how did she escape the Empire in the first place?

Because the world was now in the wake of an era of chaos, there were a surplus of unexplainable points. So Alberic thought that maybe by putting in another information request, he could gain some insight into the circumstances surrounding her. Gillette Corps wasn't the only group after her, after all, so he'd expected some new information to have come to light by now. But...

"It's just too strange. I just can't shake the feeling that we're missing something important."

Perhaps they were overlooking something critical, Zita had said. Alberic got the feeling that assessment was accurate.

"Or perhaps," Leonardo offered, "you're just looking at this problem from the wrong angle."

"...Huh?" That caused Alberic to blink, surprised. He looked back at him.

"If you would have the opinion of a lowly demihuman, that is..."

"I've told you over and over again. Your social standing is no concern of mine," Alberic asserted.

This was quite unusual for someone of his pedigree, but Alberic didn't subscribe to the idea of discrimination based on social class. It was actually because of this way of thinking that Alberic was given the "honor" of being shipped off to a meager organization like Kleeman in the first place, but he had no regrets.

"I'm a demihuman regardless," Leonardo insisted. Yet this time, his tone was not self-deprecating. "So even though our eyes are the same..." he pointed to his eyes, "I can see things in a different light from you. Like, light isn't dark for me. The only way I can experience actual darkness is to close my eyes."

Leonardo had night vision. In addition, his hearing radius was much larger than a normal human's. He was able to distinguish sounds that were too quiet, or too loud, for the rest of Gillette Corps to hear. It was as if the world he

perceived was a different world entirely.

“For example, even if we were looking at the same thing, the way we see things are different, so it would look to me like a completely different object. And from my perspective and position, what you’ve said also takes on a new meaning...”

Having said that much, Leonardo regarded Alberic doubtfully, tilting his head.

Alberic gave a big nod, and motioned for him to continue. “I see. Go on.”

“For instance...and this is just a hunch, but...what if we took the fact that we haven’t been able to dredge up any information regarding Chaika Gaz for over four years now, and that most of her circumstances remain unknown...and looked at it from the opposite side?”

“The opposite...?”

“Like, what if she never existed in the first place?” Leonardo said in an almost singsong voice.

“What do you...”

“Did the ‘Taboo Emperor’ *really* have a daughter?”

“...”

Yes. That was indeed a question that had come up frequently among those of Kleeman.

Chaika Gaz. Emperor Gaz’s daughter, whose existence had only been recognized after the war had ended. What if the girl’s existence itself was a mere fabrication?

“Real or not aside, Emperor Gaz was a monster that was said to have lived for over three hundred years, right? Do you really think he would have felt it necessary to birth offspring?”

“...Then, why?”

Chaika Gaz never existed?

Then why was that girl pretending to be her?

What motive did she have to pose as the Taboo Emperor's daughter?

Perhaps she...

"Could be anything," Leonardo said with a shrug. "Like, maybe she was a pawn that the Gaz Empire's loyalists created so they could have easy access to the throne?"

That wasn't impossible.

Reviving an empire was no easy task, least of all an empire presided over by a demon like Arthur Gaz. Their fearsome leader no more, his sphere of influence fell apart. His followers would never reconvene without his authority.

And so, it was necessary to have a successor. One with the weight of their predecessor's name.

If Leonardo's hunch was actually correct, that meant the Kleeman organization was just wasting their time with all these fakes. They were being strung along.

Truthfully, Kleeman already had a number of "Chaika Gaz"s in their custody. But if the original was a fake to begin with, a "false princess", so to speak, then an endless number of fakes could be created.

Perhaps the loyalists already had many "Chaika Gaz"s prepared somewhere, and they just sent them out when it was convenient for them, using them at their leisure. After all, these were people from the same empire that created demihumans; it probably wouldn't be so hard for them to make a bunch of copies. They could take some unidentified war orphans and modify them to be body doubles.

"...It couldn't be."

If Leonardo and Alberic's suspicions were on the mark, then this was a matter of human lives and individual personalities being toyed with. Alberic's brows creased.

"We cannot allow this."

"Wait, Gillette-sama, remember. This is all just speculation of mine!" Leonardo waved his hands in panic. "We don't have any actual proof."

“...True.”

But, if it *were*

true, it would explain the current circumstances quite well.

Perhaps even the Chaika Gaz that Gillette Corps were chasing right now thought that she was the real one, but was in actuality a mere sacrifice.

“At any rate, we need to catch up with them to confirm for ourselves. That’s our priority.”

“Well...as uninteresting of a conclusion that is, you’re right,” Leonardo said with a shrug.

Ratison was a comparatively small town.

The so-called “throne” of this area’s lord was located here, which was to say it was their principal residence—yet at the same time, it wasn’t.

The former was true because during the war, this location had provided the most protection and the defenses were the most sturdy. Due to that it was the ideal place for the lord’s subjects to gather, and so its scale had grown in many respects. Roads, walls, and other fortifications were easiest to install here.

This territory’s lord had taken up residence in many other areas, however, and this town had now become a shadow of its former self.

“Still, this town’s awfully lively,” Tohru muttered, leaning against the side frame of the Svetrana. They were in the market’s parking lot, which was a feature of most towns. There were carriages of various shapes and sizes, both horse and oxen-drawn, as well as other vehicles, parked around them. Tohru could tell that merchants from all around the country must have come here. The town appeared to be a hotbed of commerce.

“Or...well, something just seems off to me. What, though?” Tohru said, scanning the area.

“Mui?” Beside him, Chaika tilted her head.

“No, it’s the town as a whole. It’s like everything’s all over the place. It really

feels like there's barely any order at all...so....Ugh, this is so hard to explain. How should I put it...?"

After groping for an answer for a while, he pointed in the direction of the market.

"There. Look at that building."

"Market area?"

"Yeah. Look around it. See how there's no management or anything? Normally, in commerce situations there would be—well, in the first place, there would be people regulating the flow, like a gate or something. So where are the lord's tax collectors? There should be some around at least. Transportation taxes, commerce taxes, they're always really strict about that stuff. It's unheard of for the lord to go all

laissez-faire."

They had indeed paid a fee to enter the town, but it was ridiculously cheap, and those dispatched from the market to collect the fee had been mere ordinary townsfolk.

In normal cases, taxes collected like this would be easy to evade. Of course, the merchants definitely tried to, making it necessary for those on the lord's side to really tighten up regulation, sending officials to collect directly.

And yet, there were none of the sort.

It was almost as if the lord just didn't want to interfere.

"Understand, understand."

"Hey, are you *really* absolutely clueless about society?"

"Noble. Recluse." For some reason, she displayed an expression of pride and puffed out her chest.

"I mean, you *are* a princess, right?"

"Absolutely."

"But...how the hell did you survive up until now?"

"Personal virtue." She pointed to herself.

“Well, I think anyone would agree with that.”

Regardless of their intent, she hadn't involved herself with any bandits, thieves, or swindlers.

“How did you escape from the capital during all that chaos in the first place?”

“Didn't.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Outside empire, from beginning.”

From the beginning? Oh, you mean you just happened to be out at the time of the attack?”

“Yes.” Chaika gave a big nod.

It made sense. Now it was easy to see how Chaika was still alive today. At the very least, it was much easier to imagine Chaika just hiding out and secluding herself rather than making her escape from the allied forces surrounding the capital.

However...

“All by yourself, huh?”

“...Yes.” Her expression was just the slightest bit clouded over as she nodded. She was incredibly easy to read. His brows furrowed, Tohru pressed her further:

“You didn't have anyone at all with you?”

“Alone, from beginning. Before aware.”

“...”

She was alone from the start? Before she knew it?

Now, what did that mean?

Tohru peered right into her white face.

“Don't tell me...you lost your memories?”

“...Affirmative.” Chaika nodded.

After Tohru questioned her further and in more detail, he was able to

determine that she could only remember up until about a year ago. The only memories before that time she had were her memories of living in the castle back when the Empire was still prosperous. Because those several years in between were a complete blank for her, she apparently had no timeframe of when her memories before that gap had actually taken place.

“For keeping silent, apologize.” She looked ashamed. “No good time, explain.”

In other words, if she had mentioned from the outset that she was missing part of her memories, Tohru and Akari would have reason to be even more suspicious. Such an admission would decrease her credibility further. She simply had not found a good opportunity to mention it.

“Well, after all this, it’d be a little late for me to raise any objections.” Tohru scratched his cheek. “Still, that’s a pain.”

“Yes...” Chaika agreed.

What in the world could have caused Chaika to lose her memories, though?

Perhaps...

Could it be related to watching her father die right in front of her?

Come to think of it, the count back at Del Solant had mentioned that she was “supposed to be dead.” And that man was one of the heroes that had witnessed Arthur Gaz’s demise firsthand. That would mean he must have seen Chaika there. She would have to have been in the castle during the capital’s subjugation.

She may have lost her memories as the result of some sort of fear, or shock, or trauma...if she did see the very moment Arthur Gaz was killed.

“But...” Chaika suddenly muttered. “Before I realized. Over already. Father... dead.”

“...I see.”

Tohru now felt like he somehow understood why Chaika was so adamant on retrieving her father’s remains and giving him a proper burial.

Even putting aside whether she was there when it happened, the current amnesiac Chaika must have only heard about her father’s death through rumor

mills.

“My father’s dead.”

“My home is gone.”

“The war ended already.”

Having only heard about the events that took place within the gap in her memory, it would be impossible to accept. Having your future decided all at once, without your consent—Tohru knew that anger all too well.

The remains of her father, Arthur Gaz. By collecting them all and burying them, she was probably also wanting to put that several-year-long gap to rest at last. Then, at last, she could move forward.

“...Tohru?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

As Chaika looked up at him with a curious expression, Tohru’s gaze turned to the market.

At that moment, Akari came into view, returning from taking care of the parking formalities. In order to shop for food and supplies and the like, they had to park the vehicle somewhere.

“Thanks for that,” he said to her. “How’d it go?”

“No problem. The parking fee was cheap.”

“Yeah, the fee to enter the town was cheap too.”

“About that...” Akari tilted her head a bit. “I heard something pretty interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“Apparently, this territory’s lord couldn’t care less about this town. They’ve basically abandoned it.”

“Couldn’t care less?” Tohru frowned.

“They especially don’t bother with collecting taxes.”

“...But that’s...”

What the hell?

“For better or worse, they just don’t interfere in anything. Apparently they’ve left the upkeep of this town to an autonomous neighborhood council. Thanks to that, almost no taxes are collected, and everyone flocks to this town for commerce as a result.”

“A free-market town, huh? But...”

Making a town “free-market” was essentially a political maneuver that eliminated tax collection in favor of opening up trade so that information about other countries could be gained more efficiently. However, truthfully due to the possibility of spies and emissaries and such, it was no easy feat to completely eliminate admission restrictions. Of course, even if the lord wasn’t interfering directly, there was usually someone under him diligently on watch, acting as his eyes and ears.

Yet Tohru couldn’t see any surveillance anywhere in this market.

“It’s not a political maneuver here; the lord simply just doesn’t care,” Akari repeated. “I know a bit of the reason, too.”

“Why?”

“It seems that the lord was away for a long while, and after the war, took up a new post away from the heart of the territory.”

Apparently with the lord not being interested in ruling, the neighborhood council took over just as they had before, and were able to manage their town again.

“Rumor also has it that this lord massacred a large number of villagers in her previous territory. Her name...is Dominica Scoda.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Tohru and Chaika exchanged glances. If Guy’s information was to be believed, she was one of the heroes.

It wasn’t unusual for a lord to take new land as war reparations here in the

postwar era. But for a lord to murder a bunch of villagers from her old grounds, that was a story that would make anyone uneasy.

“Nii-sama.” Akari narrowed her eyes. “Don’t stare at me needlessly. Once I get pregnant it’ll be too late.”

“I’m not getting anyone pregnant!” Tohru yelled. He crossed his arms. “But, well, that certainly is an interesting story.”

Setting the village massacre aside for a bit, what if the reason she wasn’t interested in ruling, and by extension wasn’t interested in taxes, was because she already possessed more than enough “wealth?”

For instance, what if it was because she had one of Gaz’s remains, an incomparable source of magic power?

“Anyway, I asked around about where this lord lives now. It’s just as you said that boy Guy said: a mansion in the forest. It should take about half a day to get there by vehicle.”

Tohru and Chaika looked at each other.

“What to do?”

“I can’t guarantee that it’s not a trap...”

Guy’s information appeared to be accurate so far, but on the other hand he hadn’t mentioned anything to him about Dominica Scoda’s rumored “killing spree.”

Maybe that meant it was merely a rumor.

But at any rate...

“Just standing around here thinking about it won’t get us anywhere.” Tohru lifted himself up from the vehicle’s side frame. “We’re done getting our food and supplies, so let’s get out of here. We have a murderous lord to persuade.”

Part 3

Dominica Scoda.

Apparently she was a cavalier who had participated in the Empire capital subjugation signaling the end of the war. As compensation for that battle, she had gained recognition from the military and the kingdom had bequeathed onto her several parcels of land, including Ratison.

Though her court rank as a cavalier was one of the lowest, in terms of the expanse of land she owned she stood toe-to-toe with barons and baronesses. That was all because of the major accolades she received for that battle.

However...

"Dominica Scoda," Akari said, "isn't just a cavalier. She's a dragoon cavalier." They were now back on the road, inside the Svetrana.

Tohru frowned deeply. "A dragoon cavalier, huh...now that's going to be dangerous."

"Indeed," Akari agreed.

"...Dangerous?" Chaika craned her head to look back at Tohru from the driver's seat. She looked puzzled.

"There's no word for them other than 'dangerous'." He sighed. That goody-two-shoes cavalier Alberic Gillette was certainly a threat, but he was nothing compared to the threat a dragoon cavalier posed. It was no exaggeration to say that this was the worst possible outcome.

"..." Chaika only blinked. There wasn't even an ounce of fear or anxiety in her face. Almost as if...

"Now wait a minute, you can't tell me you..." Tohru stared at her with half-lidded eyes. "Everyone knows about dragoon cavaliers."

"..." She blinked again, and then... "...Tehe." She stuck out her tongue and gave a laugh like she was trying to gloss it over.

"Don't give me that 'Tehe' crap!" Tohru yelled, half-astounded and half-

disgusted. “To be this ignorant of the world...aren’t you supposed to be a wizard!?”

“Affirmative.”

“You at least know about Feyra, right?”

“Yes.” Chaika nodded.

“Well, there are these dragon-like things among them—hey, keep your eyes on the road, dammit!”

“Ah.” With an earnest nod, Chaika returned her attention to the road.

Tohru sighed and continued, staring right at her silver hair as he spoke.

“There are these dragon-like things among them called dragoons. It’s a monster that far and away outclasses all the others.”

Among the monsters known as “Feyra,” there were currently six confirmed types.

Orthrus. Cockatrice. Unicorn. Griffon. Kraken.

And...Dragoon.

They could each use magic, but the level of magic they possessed differed. The magic capability of each varied by type. In other words, the fact that they could all use magic was the only common point among them. Tohru and Chaika beat a unicorn, sure, but were they to come across a kraken or dragoon, the same outcome would not be guaranteed. As a matter of fact, the dragoon was probably the most difficult opponent on the entire continent of Verbist, to the point where it wouldn’t be wrong to call it “near-invincible.”

“Dragoon?”

“It’s sentient, its defense is basically impregnable, and it possesses magic allowing it to transform.”

A dragoon’s magic was capable of altering its own body. The reason they were called “dragoons” in the first place was due to the armor covering its body. (1) Their magic allowed them to harden their skin into something resembling armor. That armor boasted a level of durability that other creatures

couldn't hope to match. Swords, arrows, and low-grade magic couldn't even make a dent in it. And what's more, if they did somehow end up hurt, with their transformation magic they could seal up wounds or even heal broken bones, making it as if the injury never existed.

Not only were they nigh-impossible to wound, they could recover from any wound they did receive. That was the terror of the dragoon.

And that wasn't all...

"Dragoon cavaliers are those who have made a pact with a dragoon."

"Pact?" Tilting her head with uncertainty, she pointed at herself, and then Tohru.

"I told you, keep your eyes on the road. No, it's not like what we have; ours is like a "pledge." Kind of like an obligation."

"...Pledge." Chaika repeated it as if it was a new word she were encountering for the first time.

"The details are kept secret. I don't know much about it either."

"Tohru. World, ignorant." She turned his previous words back at him.

"You're the last person that should be saying that!" He sighed. "Well, anyway, our opponent this time is a dragoon cavalier, huh..."

A dragoon cavalier with a the pact of a dragoon more or less became "one" with the dragoon. Put simply, the dragoon cavalier's humanity became forfeit, or at the very least was no longer able to be recognized as a human. They were likely the most powerful beings on Verbist; in terms of battle prowess, the strongest a mere cavalier could possibly get.

However, almost as if in equivalent exchange for their strength, dragoon cavaliers were often despised by purebred cavaliers and soldiers, who saw them as "heretics" and "monsters."

"There's no way we'll just be able to steal it this time like in Del Solant."

"Improbable?"

"Really more like 'actually impossible'," Tohru admitted.

Tohru didn't like looking at battles in terms of who was "inferior or superior." Taking into account that a person's situation could change greatly depending on the circumstances, a scenario in which the conditions were exactly the same for both opponents was impossible. An opponent that wins one day won't necessarily win the next day, and that applied to the other side as well... attaching labels like "inferior" and "superior" was an incredibly childish action to a saboteur like Tohru.

Saboteur pride was something that had to be earned.

But they weren't choosy about their methods. They used anything and everything. Battle, too, was just one item in their toolbox. It was essential for a saboteur to refrain from viewing battle as an end-all solution: if there was an easier way, then it was actually preferable to avoid it entirely.

"It just occurred to me, but you do know of any way we might be able to get her to hand it over without confrontation?"

"...?" Chaika turned around, puzzled.

"Eyes on the road!"

"Got it." She once again faced the road in a panic.

"Like for instance, something we could do before we resort to defeating her and taking it, or even simply stealing it. Something we could try before we try anything coercive. You do want those remains, right?"

"Yes."

"We saboteurs aren't particular about how we accomplish our goals." He smiled thinly. "To a saboteur, pride is trivial and disposable. If it gets in the way of the mission, we don't need it. Because of that, a lot of people look down on us. Though I think I speak for all saboteurs when I say that the cavaliers and soldiers who seem to view war as the goal itself are more incomprehensible."

"If you don't fight fair and square, it's a loss even if you win." There were cavaliers out there that actually believed that. In other words, their priorities were switched. They were emphasizing the means over the goal, when it was the other way around for saboteurs.

“Anyway, we’re more flexible than those soldiers and cavaliers. For instance...” He thought of a quick example to demonstrate. “Let’s see...okay, let’s say you wanted to obtain a huge chandelier in the foyer of a lord’s mansion.”

“Okay.” Chaika’s silver hair swayed, which he took to mean that she was nodding..

“But it’s so big that you can’t carry it. You would be noticed for sure, and you can’t carry it by yourself in the first place. At first glance, it seems like an impossible task.”

“Okay.”

“So what would you do?”

“...” Chaika tilted her head. He couldn’t see her expression from behind, but he knew it had to be one of absolute befuddlement.

“Chandelier, blow up?”

“Let’s not jump to extremes yet, okay? Come on.”

“Get noticed. Then, problem, none.”

“Ah, so create a diversion. I suppose that’s one way.” Tohru continued to smile wryly. “Oh, in case you were wondering, blowing up the chandelier isn’t gonna cut it. It’d be pointless.”

“Muu...”

“In this case, one thing you could do is procure a bunch of smaller chandeliers.”

“...Mui?”

“I told you not to look over here.” He reached out, grabbed her head, and forcibly turned it towards the road. “I mean, you could make some money by stealing some smaller chandeliers and selling them, then use that money to buy the one you need.”

“...” She wiggled her body left and right. With Tohru holding her head she couldn’t nod, so this was how she was apparently expressing affirmation.

“In other words, when you restrict yourself to only thinking in terms of stealing it, you’re actually limiting your options. If your ultimate goal is to obtain something, you need to explore all the alternatives.”

For something fragile like a chandelier, it was a much safer bet to try to buy it legitimately rather than risk stealing it.

“Understand.”

“Well, anyway,” he released his grip on Chaika’s head and looked out past the trees at the night sky spread out before him, “I really doubt just saying “please” will work,” he said in a low groan.

The town far behind them, they had already entered the depths of the forest where the countess was said to live. The vehicle shook violently; they had probably rolled over a rock hidden in the brush or even a thick tree trunk.

Of course, there was no one else here. There wasn’t even a road.

Svetrana was a vehicle designed for military use, so it would be able to go the distance even in a forest like this, but if they had one of the much better state-of-the-art vehicles that nobles used, there wouldn’t be so much turbulence, Tohru guessed. At this rate, they might just have to leave the Svetrana here and head there on foot...

As soon as Tohru thought that, it happened.

“...Tohru.”

“I told you, eyes in front...” Chaika had once again turned around to face him, so he began to reprimand her again...but just then he noticed it. He hadn’t seen it like Chaika had from her driver’s seat, though. He had sensed a presence.

“...Dear brother,” Akari said in a serious tone. It seemed she had picked up on it as well.

“I know.” Getting up from the cargo hold, he made his way over to Chaika’s seat and looked through the glass windshield. There, in the dark, dreary cluster of trees, he spotted a bunch of lights swaying back and forth.

Eyes. The eyes of a beast. And that wasn’t all...

“Feyra,” Tohru said in a low voice.

It wasn't just one or two of them either. From what Tohru could see, it looked like there could be around thirty of them.

“Orthrus...!”

Blue-white lightning crackled through the air, and he could see them hiding among the trees. This was most likely the Feyra releasing their magic due to being riled up...but thanks to that, he could clearly see the creatures that those eyes dotting the darkness belonged to.

Orthrus. It was quite the peculiar creature.

In terms of unique appearance, out of all six types it was about on par with the kraken. Its general body shape was almost exactly like that of a wolf, and just as its name implied it had two heads. (2) Incidentally, one of the two heads was the “master” and the other was the “slave.” In actuality the “slave” head was just a central conduit for magic, a nervous system with the sole purpose of focusing magic power. It had no eyes, mouth, or nose of its own, but on that smooth, featureless head blue-white markings resembling facial features were etched in, almost like a mask.

“If it was just one at a time, there'd be no cause for concern...” Tohru muttered, readying the comblades at his waist. Among all six types of Feyra, the orthrus was the least threatening...however, that only held true if you were facing just one of them. If things really went south, a group of orthrus could be just as dangerous as a single dragoon.

These Feyra emitted lightning to catch their prey. Once in a group they could use their lightning to trap their prey like a net, closing off any means of escape.

“Dear brother, there's something I forgot to mention,” Akari said meaningfully. “There have been lots of casualties around this area, so the locals try not to go near it if they can help it.”

“You should've mentioned that earlier!” he yelled, but truthfully, their target resided in this forest so even if he had known beforehand, there would have been no way around it.

“No one mentioned anything about Feyra, though.”

“Doesn't that just mean that all the witnesses were killed!?”

The logical explanation for the locals being unaware of dangers in the forest was that all those who came across them never returned. The only noticeable result would be the number of missing people increasing.

“Chaika, think we can bust through them?” Tohru whispered.

“Able. But...”

“Yeah, I know.”

A vehicle was different from a horse-drawn carriage in that it was primarily made of steel. And steel happened to be a conductor of electricity. If they received a blast of lightning during their attempt at breaking through the throng of orthrus, they would still get electrocuted even though they were inside the vehicle. No, actually, the vehicle was also a magical device, so it would be even worse for Chaika, whose nervous system was currently connected to it.

“I’ll count to five. During that time you’re going to accelerate as much as you can, then you’re going to disconnect yourself from the vehicle. Got it?”

A big piece of cloth or leather ought to shield it from the electricity. Plus the vehicle had enough mass that it would keep rolling and continue to get distance even after Chaika had disconnected.

“Go!”

“Y-Yes!” Instantly, the vehicle took off. At the same time, Tohru shot a look over to Akari. Akari nodded, stood up from her seat, and indicated her boots. The soles of Tohru and Akari’s boots were imbued with soft resin that muffled any sound they made, and they were impervious to electricity. As long as they were careful where they put their hands, they were probably going to be okay even if the vehicle got struck.

Now onto the next issue—

“One...two...three...four...five...okay, Chaika, disconnect!”

“Roger!” Chaika squeezed her eyes shut. Perhaps she was trying to shut off the flow of magic within her. Then she tugged on the connecting cord, unplugging it from her neck.

“Nya!?”

Chaika suddenly let out a sort-of-yelp, because Tohru had grabbed her from behind and was now embracing her. But that didn't make him loosen his grip; he just whispered softly in her ear.

"Hold on tight."

"...Okay."

Unexpectedly, this seemed to calm her down immediately. Chaika sent a bright smile towards the nonplussed Tohru.

"This situation. When we first met, same."

"Ah."

Indeed, when they had first met Tohru had embraced her just like this.

"Trust, strongly."

It was a genuine compliment. When Chaika looked up at him to meet his gaze and delivered that line without a trace of suspicion or fear, Tohru felt a strange sensation in his cheeks. He realized that they had involuntarily started burning.

While Tohru continued to think how honest-to-god embarrassing this was, he continued to hug Chaika there in the vehicle. And then...

Zzt!

He saw light-blue bolts flash, illuminating the sky dimly. The orthrus were throwing bolts around the Svetrana in order to trap it. Flashes of light leapt about, and sparks flew off various parts of the vehicle, including the area around the driver's seat.

"—Damn!"

Covering his head with both arms, he tried to puzzle out when would be a good moment to unsheath his comblades from his waist.

Magic was not well-suited for close-quarters combat. Humans used it through Gundo, which were often bulky, long and required chants to activate, but Feyra didn't use Gundo. They were, however, still required to chant, meaning that they couldn't attack consecutively.

Which meant that once they released one attack, there would be a small

interval of time before they would be able to release another.

“Akari, I’m leaving Chaika to you!” Tohru yelled, and leapt from the vehicle. Rather than forcibly trying to absorb the impact of his fall, he hit the ground rolling and unsheathed both blades.

“Hya!” With a quick intake of breath, he threw the blade in his right hand. Its aim true, it lodged itself right in the slave head of a nearby orthrus. The orthrus began to writhe in pain, emitting a howl not unlike a regular canine. The slave head was only the control center for its magic, so attack like that wouldn’t kill it; however, its nervous system was contained in that head so it had to have been in severe pain.

The orthrus convulsed like a fish out of water. Tohru had deliberately targeted the slave head not out of some sense of mercy or goodwill, but because he thought that if the orthrus saw their one of their brethren in pain, the rest might recoil a bit. Fighting them one at a time was much easier than taking on the whole pack. Just how many of them could he intimidate in the moments before they released a coordinated attack? That was the question that would determine his fate.

He readied his remaining blade in one hand, and with the other yanked on a thread, the end of which had been wrapped around the hilt of the blade he’d thrown. The blade was buried in the orthrus’s head, but even so he was able to successfully jerk it out. The blade leapt back into his hand, and he went on guard.

“Tohru!”

From the center of the Svetrana, whose remaining momentum had caused it to pass Tohru by,, Chaika’s head popped out. It appeared that Akari had wrapped her in a leather cloak. She was readying her coffin with quick, panicked movements—surely she couldn’t be aiming to protect Tohru with the Gundo inside?

“Just go! Don’t worry about me!” Tohru yelled angrily.

If it was just him he had to worry about, he was confident enough in his agility that he could escape. Plus. if she recklessly brought out her Gundo now, it would act as a sort of lightning rod. The orthrus’s attacks would be directed

towards her instead. Then any point there was to disconnecting her from the vehicle in the first place would be rendered null and void.

“Don’t use your magic! Just go! I’ll be—”



I'll be all right, was what he wanted to say.

“Herukerun...Unzerun...Korukerun...Piye...Sebue!”

“...!?”

Tohru stiffened in shock.

An orthrus’ magic chant. And what’s more, that was the very last part of it.

That was way too quick. Tohru had estimated it would have taken at least ten seconds for the orthrus to regain their composure and complete another chant, and yet...

“!?”

No. Looking closer, there were definitely some orthrus that were still caught off guard. However...he also saw some that hadn’t been affected, continuing their chants.

“They got one up on me!” Tohru shouted in panic.

The throng of orthrus had already been one step ahead of Tohru. They had separated themselves into two groups: one attacked on the front lines, while the other hung back and started their chants as soon as the first group’s attacks had finished. Doing so, they were able to keep up a consecutive barrage of offense.

“Shit—”

Returning both swords to their scabbards, he fastened the front of his cloak... and covered his head with both arms. He wasn’t sure how much good it would do, but it was better than no insulation at all.

Zzt!

He heard the sound, and before he knew it he was engulfed in a web of lightning.

“Gyaaahh!?”

The lightning coursing through his body, Tohru let out a scream. Saboteurs were supposed to keep a cool head at all times, whether in the middle of an assassination or even facing their own demise. That scream just now was an incredibly shameful display; however, the pain was so overwhelming that he

was unable to just grin and bear it.

Every muscle in his body in spasms, he collapsed to the ground, twitching. He could no longer will himself to move. He tried to relax his convulsing body, but his brain wasn't processing the commands.

"Guh...uh...guh..."

The tables had been turned. Tohru lay there on the ground twitching, just like the orthrus whose head he had split open.

"Tohru!"

"Brother!"

Tohru heard two distinct, panicked voices from the Svetrana, which was still in motion.

"Go...on...ahead...!" Tohru shouted with everything he had.

Because deep down in his hazy, pain-wracked consciousness, a possibility of victory still flickered.

The orthrus' attacks were powerful, sure, but they weren't fatal. That was because they used their magic to hunt; in other words, it was enough if they just immobilized their prey. After all, orthrus had a tendency to eat their prey alive, humans in particular. Which meant...

They're going to come finish me off with their fangs...

He likely had a few seconds between then and now. If he could just endure the pain until then, in close-quarters combat he actually had a chance of winning. Take away their lightning, and the orthrus weren't much different from your average dog.

God...dammit...calm down!

Yet he couldn't even issue an order to his convulsing body properly. He had intended to chant the keywords to unleash his hidden body fortification technique, "Iron-Blood Transformation," yet his tongue and lips were unable to form the words. Not to mention, focusing was impossible. His life was literally hinging on how long it would take for his body to return to normal.

“Gu...gahhh...”

He could feel the hot breaths of the beasts closing in around him.

His vision clouded red with pain, he saw orthrus after orthrus after orthrus coming closer, swaying...

Shit. I'm going to be eaten alive.

There likely didn't exist a cause of death more terrifying. Saboteurs weren't a bunch to just roll over peacefully, so years ago Tohru had already accepted the possibility he might leave the world in a less-than-savory manner...but even so, just imagining the beasts tearing his insides apart made him want to retch.

Chills ran up his spine. He felt rank, steaming breath hit his face.

He saw the fangs leaping for his throat—

“Begone, you mutts.”

Without warning or preamble, it resounded out above Tohru and the orthrus....a calm, completely out-of-place female voice.

“Stay here, and I'll leave all your corpses out to dry.”

“!?”

Tohru tried to think through the severe pain. Who in the world? Certainly not Akari or Chaika. It was a completely different—

“!”

Suddenly, a shadow loomed over Tohru.

A dragon...!? That was his first thought.

It certainly resembled a dragon flying overhead with its wings spread out. But it was apparently just the shadow of a fluttering cloak.

The one that had leapt to Tohru's aid, surprisingly without kicking up any humus and fallen leaves in the process, had the figure of a woman. Judging from her gleaming silver armor and long sword, she had to be either a cavalier, soldier, or swordsman.

He could only see her from the back, so he couldn't see her face. But...

“...”

Even so, Tohru thought she was beautiful. Her figure from behind, as well as her posture, conveyed a beauty that was not artificial, but wholly natural. And yet she exuded majesty to the point that it was almost bewitching. It was a back that could incite fighting spirit into her followers on the front lines, the kind of back you could rely on. The exact opposite of a saboteur who made their way along the battlefield shrouded in darkness. Her long, wavy flaxen hair was adorned with small silver ornaments.

“Well? Will you attack, or stand down?” the woman asked.

In response, the Feyra...

...No way.

He felt the orthrus' presence begin to recede.

This woman had gotten a pack of feral monsters to disperse with nothing more than a simple threat. She didn't even have to unsheathe her sword.

She's the monster.

In truth, the aura coming from her whole being had communicated quite clearly to Tohru that she was no ordinary girl. It was so overpowering that if she were to regard Tohru as an enemy, the question wouldn't be whether he could beat her, but whether he'd be able to escape in one piece.

But...

Well, isn't this ironic, Tohru thought amidst the throes of pain.

Female warriors of this caliber, with presences bordering on beastly, weren't exactly a dime a dozen.

Which meant...

“Can you stand?” The woman finally turned around to look at Tohru. Her features were dim in the moonlight, but he was able to roughly make them out. Narrow blue eyes, a defined chin, and thin, pursed lips. Her outward appearance conveyed maturity and sagacity in much the same way that Akari's did, yet this woman practically embodied the image of an adult woman's charm. Her muscles, clearly defined even underneath her armor, and her

voluptuous breasts and hips were definitely those of a woman that had fully blossomed.

“Did the citizens of Raison not mention that this area was dangerous?” she asked, seemingly taken aback. A noncommittal tone, belying any hint of demanding gratitude or boasting about her strength. It was as if she viewed coming to the incapacitated Tohru’s rescue on the same level as reaching a hand out to a child that had tripped and fallen on the ground. To her, chasing off a pack of orthrus was likely as simple as that.

She had rescued Tohru from the brink of death. By all rights, he should have been deeply moved. However...

How in the hell are we going to take the remains from someone like this?

Despondent, Tohru stared at her dim, outstretched hand.

At the hand of this area’s countess, the dragoon cavalier Dominica Scoda.

That was their first encounter.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) In this novel, “Dragoon” uses the kanji for “armored.”\

(2) In this novel, “Orthrus” uses the kanji for “dual” and “head.”

Chapter 3: Blueness of Dragoon Cavalier

Part 1

For now, Tohru thought it best to feign an astonished expression and tone of voice.

“This place is...?”

Acting wasn't one of Tohru's specialties, but he could at least handle this. Tohru's group were mere passerby cornered by Feyra while trying to escape the forest, and Dominica had rescued them from a precarious situation—or at least, that's what Tohru wanted her to believe.

“Surprised? Well, when you're used to it, it's of no consequence.” She turned to him, showing him a bright smile. She seemed to have bought into his improvisation.

“Troublesome as it is, I do have a duty to that town.”

There was a solitary mansion in front of them.

For a countess's mansion, there wasn't really much to it...the scale was considerably smaller than usual. During the long period of wars, the majority of count's estates were fortified to withstand combat. Actually, it was more like the town itself was just an extension of the estate, and the townspeople just happened to be sandwiched in the space between their walls.

But Dominica Scoda's estate was different.

There were no outer or inner walls; not even a moat. It was completely and recklessly defenseless; it really was nothing more than a building built in the middle of a secluded forest.

But thinking about it...maybe there was no need for defense. The forest itself was basically its “walls” and “moat.” Tohru knew from his experience with the orthrus that if anyone were to tread carelessly in this forest, like a half-cocked infantry setup, they would surely be annihilated. The very fact that this was the stomping ground of a dragoon cavalier probably also contributed to the fact

that other Feyra didn't dare go near. That in itself was like an invisible layer of protection.

Difficult to get in and out of, huh. That means I really need to consider our method of escape.

Tohru continued to think, looking around at the surrounding forest, when—

"Nii-sama," Akari whispered. He looked to where Akari was pointing, and his eyes narrowed.

The form of Dominica ahead of them was wavering.

The silver-armored figure, enveloped in a blue-white magical light, slowly began to crumble. Outlines became hazy, almost like they were melting into the environment, and her upper body began to morph. Once it was done, her attire had transformed into a simple set of flaxen clothing.

So that's...the magic of a dragoon...

He had heard about it before, but this was his first time witnessing it for himself.

"I don't have any subordinates living with me. It's rather quaint, so for that I apologize."

Opening the door to the foyer, Dominica invited them in, but then she stopped, regarding them with furrowed brows when she saw Chaika's eyes, which were as big as saucers, and Tohru's surprised expression that he deliberately left unconcealed.

"Something the matter?"

"It's just...a bit of a shock, is all," Tohru spoke up for the whole party.

"Well, the location aside, this shouldn't be too unusual a mansion..."

"No, not that..."

"Transformation, surprising," Chaika chimed in.

At long last, she seemed to finally realize.

"Hm? Ah, that, right." She nodded like she understood. "Yes, forgive me, I wasn't thinking. I completely forgot how that looks."

To her, that change of clothes just now was probably the most inconsequential of actions. Far from being proud of it, it was likely as second-nature to her as taking off her coat when she entered her home.

“So sorry to shock you like that. Normally, it’s just me living here, so...I tend to forget how using my magic appears to other people.” She smiled wryly.

The atmosphere in the mansion itself was chilly; and dead silent, too: there was no sign of anyone else being in it. If you didn’t know any better, you could easily mistake the building for being abandoned. It appeared she was telling the truth...she really was the only one living here, no servants to speak of.

“No, I’m grateful that you rescued me...and even went as far as to shelter me in your own home.” Tohru faked a subservient demeanor.

Yet inside, his mind was geared towards battle. *Now, how should we attack?*

This Dominica might possess one of the remains, which was to say there was a possibility that Tohru’s group would end up fighting her in order to take them from her. But for a dragoon cavalier equipped with such overwhelmingly impregnable defense, a surprise attack was the most viable tactic. An all-out attack before she had a chance to take out her claws—with that, they might be able to get a jump on their opponent. In that case, it would be most preferable for her to have not noticed their presence at all.

Yet they had already been seen, so their methods of surprise attack at this juncture were severely limited.

Perhaps she has some kind of weak point?

There were many different kinds of ways to take the enemy by surprise. There was waiting for an opportunity for an opponent to show a blind spot, and attacking a psychological weak point wasn’t out of the question either. In this case, it might be possible that they could cozy up to her now and then assassinate her in her sleep.

For a saboteur, there was no such thing as “dirty” or “unfair.” If it was for the sake of the mission, they would gladly discard their pride. That was their strength.

“Tohru, Tohru.”

As he was investigating the possible options, he felt a tug at his sleeve. It was Chaika.

“Lucky. Good night’s sleep,” she said, looking positively delighted. But Tohru gave her a frown just slight enough that Dominica wouldn’t notice, and whispered in the simple-minded girl’s ear.

“...What do you think you’re doing?”

“Mui?”

“How you can be so nonchalantly overjoyed? Don’t you remember your objective,

Chaika Trabant

?” Tohru asked her, trying his utmost to keep his volume down so that Dominica wouldn’t catch on.

“...Mui?”

“I’m talking about the possibility that that dragoon cavalier has one of the pieces of the remains! You do understand that in this situation our chances of taking her by surprise have been ruined, right? It’s like we’re smack dab in the middle of enemy territory!”

“...Ah.” Chaika struck her open left palm with her right fist with a ‘pon’ sound and nodded.

“Remember. Of course, remember. Forget, no way.”

“You completely forgot, didn’t you.”

Even as he was saying it he couldn’t believe it.

Of course, for a while now they had been operating on an extremely strict schedule and hadn’t had time to get a proper night’s sleep in an actual room, so it wasn’t like Tohru didn’t understand Chaika’s elation at the prospect of being able to sleep soundly for one night. Out of the towns they had been to, the one time they had managed to secure lodgings, they had spotted Gillette’s crew and had to hightail it out of there.

“But, Tohru.”

“What?”

“Tohru said. Negotiations, possible.”

“...Ah.” Tohru let out an idiotic grunt.

Yes, indeed. He had previously mentioned to Chaika they didn’t necessarily need to take the remains by force.

Truthfully, ever since he had witnessed Dominica chasing away the orthrus without even unsheathing her sword, Tohru, in very Tohru-like fashion, had probably unconsciously become overtaken with thoughts of how he was to take down the strong opponent in front of him. As a rule, saboteurs weren’t supposed to be choosy about their methods to achieve their goals, nor was it good for them to confine themselves to one line of thinking. In that respect, it seemed Tohru still had a ways to go.

““You completely forgot, didn’t you.””

Chaika cleverly parroted Tohru’s own words back at him.

“Oh, so you’re completely fluent at times like these, huh!?”

“Ouch, ouch, abuse, prohibited!” Chaika yelped as Tohru’s fists ground into the temples of her forehead.

“Indeed, Nii-sama,” Akari cut in. “The only one allowed to abuse you or be abused by you is me.”

“Now what are you on about?”

“Oh, just talking about how you’re tossing aside your sister to engage in skinship with a total stranger,” she said without a hint of emotion. She certainly seemed indignant, and yet since she was a girl whose emotions never came to the forefront, or rather, even if they did they were very slight, it was hard to tell.

“Talk about the height of disgrace. My pride as your younger sister has been gravely wounded. I demand an apology, as well as compensation.”

“Your idea of pride’s a complete mystery. Wait, what do you mean by ‘apology and compensation’?”

“Well, for starters you could whisper ‘Don’t be stupid, you’re the only one for me, Akari’ in my ear, and then there’d be passionate touching, accompanied by ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’; thumps and bumps.”

Such a bold-faced, serious statement, and yet when she said it in that boring monotone as if she was reading off a script, it was just unsettling.

“Neither one of those things is an apology or compensation, you know.”
Tohru glared at his sister-by-obligation through half-lidded eyes.

Just then, Dominica turned to face them—

“By the way, how are you all related?” she asked.

“...”

Tohru’s group exchanged glances.

“You don’t seem like merchants...well, no merchants would come this far into the forest anyway.”

Come to think of it, since this encounter with Dominica had been so sudden, they hadn’t had time to come up with a “setting.” Well, actually on the way here Tohru had thought up several scenarios, but he hadn’t had the opportunity to relay any of them to Chaika or Akari.

What to do?

They had come to a forest that the locals considered dangerous enough to not set foot in. Just that point alone was abnormal. Excuses like “Well, we were just passing by” or “We got lost” probably wouldn’t cut it. As for them being armed, it wasn’t too unusual to bring weapons into a remote region for defensive purposes, so even if she caught sight of those he could probably talk his way out of it—

“Actually...”

It was Akari that answered the question.

Though she clearly caught sight of Tohru’s surprised expression, she returned it with a stony averting of her eyes and continued.

“We’re siblings.”

“Well, I can tell that much.”

Earlier when they hadn’t been trying to conceal their voices, Akari had called Tohru “Nii-sama” plain and simple, so of course.

Then Akari said,

“We are actually blood-related siblings, and yet we’ve become hopelessly entangled in a forbidden love.”

An off-the-wall statement, yet she announced it grandly.

“Wait—!?”

Tohru’s face blanched, but Akari seemed to pay it no mind—she just continued on in her monotone script-read voice.

“But though there was no way our parents and the rest of our family would accept something so illicit, no one could extinguish the flames of our burning love. The flames had spread too far. They crackle, they burn.”

The words seemed to flow from her mouth like a waterfall, and yet she remained as expressive as a stone.

This tale of forbidden love had even gotten Chaika staring wide-eyed at her; however she continued on unaffected.

“Though we knew we would be eternally joined together in death eventually, deep down we realized the better option. We decided to elope from that place, hand in hand, and so in order to dissuade our family from pursuing us, we deliberately came to this dangerous forest.”

“...I see.”

Dominica stopped walking. She didn’t just look over her shoulder at them; she turned her entire body around to face them fully. Her eyes narrowed, and Tohru felt as if she was seeing straight through them.

You idiot, what’s with that ridiculous bullshit out of nowhere!?

Tohru mouthed to Akari with the slightest lip movement he could muster.

It has persuasive power,

she mouthed back. She looked proud, of all things.

There's absolutely nothing strange about a pair of siblings eloping in the throes of forbidden love to come to this forest on a forced march.



It's completely strange! And how are you able to come up with this shit off the

top of your head, anyway?

This is actually all taken from an ever-evolving draft of my ongoing work, "Passion."

When did you start writing that!?

Or rather, Tohru had never known Akari to have such a hobby.

I've already got up to 30 volumes in the final draft stage.

That long!? No, never mind that! She's definitely going to find the scenario suspicious!

Even under normal circumstances it was going to be next to impossible to get the jump on her, and now with this, she would be on guard for sure. Things had gone from bad to worse for such a pointless reason. Just as he was thinking of some way to backpedal, some way to explain to her that his sister was delusional—

"...I see. That's how it is, huh?"

Then...Dominica gave a big nod, as if she had been deeply moved.

"...Uh, what?" Tohru froze. His eyes widened despite himself.

But Dominica continued to nod over and over again, saying, "It must have been hard for you two..." She sounded earnest.

"No, uh..."

"You may rest easy. I won't be so callous as to blow the whistle on your love. It is what it is."

Against all expectations, it seemed that Dominica had completely bought into Akari's nonsense. She hadn't even doubted it for a second; in fact, she spoke reassuringly, almost encouraging.

"Until you've gotten rid of your pursuers, feel free to think of this as your own home."

"Um...th-thank you...very much." Tohru thought it best to bow his head here.

Although he couldn't think of a more undesirable outcome, there was no longer any other option but to go along with Akari's fantasies.

However...

“But, if that’s the case...” Dominica’s gaze shot over to the surprised Chaika, as if to imply one part of the story just didn’t add up. “Who is this girl, then?”

“Ah, she’s...”

Giving Dominica an ambiguous smile, he gave Akari a nudge with his elbow.

What about Chaika? What’s her story?

Indeed. The problem was Chaika.

The story of two siblings having eloped in the name of love, abandoning their friends, family, and hometown in the process, had worked, but sticking with this scenario of course meant that Chaika was now unaccounted for, or rather, her existence in this setting was unnatural. Tohru really doubted that a cover-up like “actually, she’s another one of my sisters” would fly here.

Hmm. That is a problem. Akari made a face.

My story is only a chronicle of the “oohs” and “aahs” between brother and sister. It does not allow for the inclusion of any extraneous supporting characters.

Sounds like the worst work ever written, then.

Once Tohru was done mouthing his reply to Akari...he turned to Dominica once more and spoke.

“We humbly ask for your consideration here. This girl has also been chased away from her hometown.”

Rather than making up some huge tale, he determined that divulging her actual circumstances was the best option here.

In other words, the truth, but not the whole truth.

“Our paths fatefully aligned, and we ended up traveling together.”

“...I see.”

Dominica glanced over at Chaika, as well as the coffin which the girl so dutifully carried around, and nodded.

“Everyone has their circumstances...and there are also circumstances that people aren’t comfortable with divulging to complete strangers.”

“I am relieved that you understand.” Tohru bowed his head.

Well, without knowing any details, the sight of “a girl walking around carrying a coffin” just wasn’t normal, no matter how you look at it. It seemed that Dominica had gone ahead and filled in the blanks with some complex, hesitant-to-announce-publicly circumstances of her own surmising. For better or worse, hearing Akari’s earlier delusional novel setting had probably left plenty to the imagination.

Regardless, it seemed it had now become a situation where they had to continue acting out “The Tale of The Siblings’ Forbidden Love (Plus 1 Extra)”.

Nii-sama.

Akari looked proud for some reason.

What is it?

This was an inevitable conclusion.

Shut up!

Tohru felt supremely dissatisfied at not being able to shout at her at full volume.

Part 2

Inside their April-model vehicle, the six members of Gillette Corps were all gathered. They were bound for Ration.

Officially, the corps moved with Alberic Gillette at the helm, and the Kleeman organization had given Alberic full rein to decide its where and how it operated. That was to say, Alberic was at liberty to decide how to handle the majority of the directives issued to him by headquarters. It was set up so that his fellow corps members were his subordinates, serving only as extra limbs where his own could not reach.

But when it came to his unit, Alberic detested playing the dictator.

Of course, if it came down to it he wouldn't hesitate to order his unit around, however, when new development surrounding or pertaining to the objective arose, he preferred to call meetings and let everyone have their say. From a societal perspective he still considered himself green and lacking in experience, so he valued the varied opinions his team, a unit full of people from all different walks of life, brought to the table.

At first, there actually were a few members of his team that denounced this method, calling it "very un-leader-like" (like Vivi, for instance), but now the entire corps accepted his method of leadership.

"...So..." Alberic's second-in-command Nikolay began, his gaze falling on the documents lying atop their roundtable. By the way, the wounds he had received in his battle with the young saboteur the other day were still healing, so his already massive arm was still wrapped in thick, white bandages. It now resembled a tree trunk even more than before. "What's bothering you?"

Sitting around the table clockwise, starting from Alberic, were Vivi, Zita, Nikolay, and then Leonardo. Mattheus was in the driver's seat, in charge of operating the April vehicle, yet he was close enough that he could still participate in the conversation.

"I just feel like there are too many unknowns," Alberic said. "Our objective is to capture the Taboo Emperor Arthur Gaz's offspring Chaika Gaz, and in the

process secure the remains that she's trying to collect. However," he pointed to the documents from headquarters on the table, "there's almost no information pertaining to the girl."

This sheaf of documents was a bit thicker than the ones he had been given just before he had accepted the mission, though that added thickness could be attributed mostly to the lengthy arrest records of all the fakes calling themselves "Chaika Gaz." Information on Chaika Gaz herself was just about as scant as before.

"Why have so many fakes come out of the woodwork to impersonate her anyway?"

"Well, that's..." he trailed off.

"Yes, what of that?" Nikolay agreed with a nod.

Calling yourself Chaika Gaz and preaching about the second coming of the empire was indeed one way to carry out a moneymaking scheme. That in itself was not unusual. But there had been way too many impostors. To be honest, even before they started hunting down this particular Chaika Gaz, Gillette Corps had already taken two goons claiming they were "the Taboo Emperor's daughter" into custody.

If extorting money was their only goal, there were a number of others they could impersonate instead. As a matter of fact, having the name "Chaika Gaz" would actually be quite risky for business.

"Well, not having enough information is only one of our main problems," said the girl with magnificently wavy hair, Vivi.

Despite the refined, noble impression her outward appearance gave, she was an assassin. She was unwilling to disclose what kind of life she led before joining the corps, and yet...

"I'm Chaika Gaz."

She said, producing a silver wig from somewhere and plopping it on her head. Then, she clasped both hands together as if in prayer.

"In accordance with Father's dying wish, I will strive my hardest to resurrect

the Gaz Empire. Please lend me money, mister.”

“Wahahaha!”

“Ahahaha!”

Nikolay and Zita both broke into explosive laughter, pointing at her. Alberic and Leonardo cracked small, strained smiles.

“Just kidding~”

Removing the silver wig, Vivi stuck out her tongue impishly and continued speaking.

“Since no one knows if she really exists or not, that makes it all the more easy to falsify her appearance. Deceiving and scamming people would be a snap...all you need are the traits ‘girl’ and ‘silver hair.’”

For an assassin, proficiency in theater and disguise were indispensable. If Vivi was so inclined, she probably really could fool anyone with her “Chaika Gaz” act.

“That’s true...” said Alberic. “But on the other hand, it’s also true that out of the ones we’ve been after, there were also those that didn’t seem to be pulling any kind of scam at all...this current Chaika Gaz included.”

“You’re talking about the refugees of the Empire trying to make a new ‘leader,’ right?” Nikolay said, wiping away the tears that had formed in his eyes as a result of his boisterous laugh.

“Yes, there were indeed some Chaika Gaz impostors with that in mind, however...”

Alberic reached out for the documents. On the topmost page was a list of all the confirmed Chaika Gaz sightings up until now.

The number totaled over thirty., and seventy percent of those had already been arrested. As previously mentioned, the girls had mostly been selfish individuals trying to make a quick buck...but the problem was that there were three “Chaika Gaz”s that were not.

Those three girls...had all committed suicide after their capture.

From the existence of wizards like Mattheus who specialized in controlling the will of Feyra, Alberic knew that it was possible to forcibly extract information out of a human left alive. Those three girls had most likely taken their own lives because they were afraid of that very fact.

In other words, they had a secret that they were willing to take to the grave.

Alberic and the others suspected that it was information pertaining to the refugee army.

And so, the reason why Gillette Corps were going to such lengths to chase after “Chaika Gaz” was to nip in the bud any societal unrest, indiscriminate slaughter or rebellious insurrections that the Empire refugees might bring forth. Though they were refugees now, they had once been a part of a gigantic major power. If they were to all mobilize, they had more than enough personnel to overtake a small country.

Therefore, Alberic and the others had also surmised that for the realization of that express purpose, hoisting up a new leader and gaining power through the acquisition of Gaz’s remains were perfectly natural courses of action.

But...

“Mattheus.”

“Yes?”

Seemingly surprised at being suddenly called upon, Mattheus twisted his head back to look at them from the driver’s seat.

“You were on their tail for a while. During that time, was there any indication that our current Chaika Gaz was engaging in contact with any refugees or allies of the Empire?”

“No, there were none,” said Mattheus as he rubbed his bald head with his palm. He had been on reconnaissance, previously tailing the Chaika Gaz that Gillette Corps had met in Del Solant. In actuality it had lasted just a bit over three days, but regardless he was the one in the group that had observed the girl’s actions the most. “As far as I could tell, she acted alone the whole time.”

“And then she went and recruited that saboteur,” said Nikolai, nodding.

After investigating, they found out that this Chaika Gaz had put in a request to the Del Solant guild, recruited siblings named Tohru and Akari, and had raided Count Abarth's mansion. The young man who Nikolay had fought with was probably Tohru.

But...if that girl really was being put up by the refugee army as their new leader, they really didn't have a good handle on her, or rather, being left to her own devices to loiter around the continent as she liked didn't really fit the definition of "leader." There should have been someone watching her, or guarding her, or even someone by her side.

"Which means that she really didn't have anyone supporting her? No one at all?"

"If that's so..." Alberic flicked the documents with his index finger, "then who in the world is this girl? Could she be the real thing? Or maybe..."

"Not a swindler, nor a refugee of the Empire...a third type of Chaika Gaz, then?" muttered Zita, tilting her head.

"Her being the genuine article or not, the real problem is what her goal is," Leonardo spoke up. "Well, if she is the real deal, though, she may actually just be trying to give her father a proper burial."

"We certainly can't discount that possibility, either."

The figure of the girl he had seen at Del Solant flashed through his mind.

In some respects, she had had this ephemeral air about her. Nor did she seem like the scheming type in any way. Of course, that all could also be part of her act, though—

"We can't lose sight of the fact that there could be some other motive, as well. Like someone could be using her, and she simply hasn't realized it—something like that. If that's true, we can't let her users do as they please. Like for instance, that poor cute girl's own servants."

"..."

"They'll use whatever they can to achieve their goal, so...huh? What's the matter, everyone?"

Alberic noticed that everyone's gazes from all around the table, save for Mattheus who was preoccupied with driving, had all fixed on a singular point: him. No, he was the one talking, and of course he was their leader, so naturally they would be focused on him. But...how to phrase it...he felt like the intensity of their gazes was a bit different than usual.

"Uh...what did I say?"

Nikolay spoke up first, scratching his cheek.

"Out of all the "Chaika Gaz"s thus far, you seem a bit...attached to this one."

"Attached?' R-really now?" Alberic tilted his head.

It was true that he felt something different about this Chaika versus all the previous ones.

But...then.

"Vivi?"

For some reason, Vivi had taken out the silver wig again, and was now stabbing it hatefully with a needle she had taken out with her bag. Witnessing his subordinate do something so odd, Alberic was perplexed.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing in particular."

With a sulky look, Vivi tossed the wig in the air. She probably wasn't aiming for him, but the wig landed on Mattheus's bald head, and since the needle was still lodged in there, Mattheus let out a sharp cry.

"Ouch!?"

"Well, I mean, you *are* her Gillette-sama—"

"Towards you, Vivi feels pure—"

Nikolay and Zita both opened their mouths to speak, and in the next instant...

"Silence," the assassin girl ordered.

At some point, though he didn't know when, she had gotten up and was now brandishing two needles from behind them, right at the backs of their heads.

“Understood. I’ll shut up.”

“Absolutely. No more from me.”

Zita and Mattheus both held up one hand, as if swearing an oath.

“...I just don’t get it, though...”

“That’s just as well. It’s so like you, after all,” Leonardo laughed, leaving a stymied Alberic in the lurch.

Locational advantage was the main idea behind the art of war—that was what he had learned back in the Acura village.

He had also been taught that when faced with a difficult situation, a person would tend to forget their original objective. However, this could be countered by taking a step back and assessing the entire situation. Doing so often opened up useful paths to victory in unexpected places.

Adhering to this line of thinking, Tohru decided to first take a walk around the mansion, examining its interior.

He found that structurally, there wasn’t anything too unusual.

The majority of noble’s mansions had a specific architecture to them—four walls around the outside, and an open area on the inside. Dominica Scoda’s mansion was much the same—a square building walled in on all sides, and a courtyard in the middle.

“What a simple mansion,” Tohru muttered his thoughts out loud.

She was a military woman before she was a countess, so in that respect the idea that she would want to live in such simple quarters wasn’t particularly surprising...but she didn’t even have any decorations or anything. She was a military woman, so Tohru figured she’d at least have some weapons or suits of armor on display, but there was nothing of the sort.

Furthermore, it looked like she rarely cleaned house.

Dust had accumulated everywhere, to the point that wherever Tohru walked he left footprints. The atmosphere really was that of an abandoned house; that

was to say, there were no other signs of life anywhere.

“Still...a pretty unusual situation.”

As Tohru walked the hallways, he muttered to himself, mixing a sigh in.

As he had mentioned to Chaika, if it came down to taking the remains by force, then they had no choice but to confront the dragoon cavalier Dominica Scoda. Still, it was a dragoon cavalier versus two saboteurs and a wizard. If he had to put into words, the idea of going up against her made him incredibly uneasy.

“To think we’d end up going against a dragoon cavalier...”

Dragoon cavaliers were in a whole different class from a normal cavalier or soldier.

You might as well think of them as a demi-human cavalier.

Put crudely, they were “part-monster”, or “beings who had sold their soul and dignity to the Feyra.” Many saw them as existences that had already forfeited their humanity.

They had exchanged part of their body for that of a dragoon, implanted it, and become “part-dragon.”

Basically, the dragoon Feyra would give over a part of its body to the cavalier, and the cavalier’s magic would effectively be raised to that of a dragoon.

“A dragoon...huh.”

Several varieties of beings called “dragons” had been identified here on Verbist, like wyverns and wyrms, but none of them could be called Feyra. They couldn’t use magic, and their intelligence wasn’t very high—mere “large lizards”, some would say. There had been a wyrm nest close to the Acura village, so Tohru was relatively familiar with them.

Dragoons, on the other hand, were Feyra.

They could use magic, they were smart, and it was even in the name—they were armor-wearing dragons.

Or to be more precise, they were able to harden and transform parts of their

bodies, raising their defenses to astronomical levels. Basically a dragon's magic was "the ability to alter their own body."

But it wasn't as simple as that they were near-invincible.

By using their body-altering magic, on the off-chance they did receive a serious wound they were able to heal it immediately.

And it was the same for the dragoon cavalier, who was effectively one with the dragoon.

Through the use of a "pact," even if they were a short distance away from each other, a dragoon's magic would reach the dragoon cavalier.

Therefore, it was impossible to even nearly kill them when they were armed. If they so desired, they could use the dragoon's magic to equip themselves with armor in a split second, or they could even fabricate a sword or spear by lengthening their skin. What's more, as long as they didn't get any of their vital areas like their head or heart destroyed, they could heal their body any time they needed to.

All this made dragoon cavaliers enough of a threat already.

But that was without factoring in the attack power of the dragon itself.

They had massive builds that easily dwarfed that of horses and cows, and were equipped with muscles that, naturally, were not even in the same league as a human's. They could punch, kick, swing its tail, or flap their wings. With simple attacks like that, dragons could level houses with one attack or smash holes into castle walls.

In other words, just because regular dragons couldn't attack with magic didn't mean they weren't strong.

"If only there was some sort of weak point..."

To be honest, he knew next to nothing about the ecology of dragoon cavaliers.

There weren't that many of them to begin with. The countries had started treating them like some big military secret, and so information about them no longer circulated. Tohru only knew this information based on what his war-

veteran senior saboteurs had told him—he had never seen one in person.

Dragons on their own were said to show up in the most surprising places ... even soldiers in the same encampment as dragoon cavaliers said that they showed up before you knew it, and you couldn't even tell whether or not you were approaching one—that sort of stealthy manner of movement despite their massive size apparently made them all the more unsettling.

“If it's that big, perhaps we should stage our attack in the mansion—but then if the mansion gets destroyed in the process and we get crushed under the rubble, that'd be pointless.”

If it came down to a fight, and they lured Dominica into the mansion, perhaps that would at least keep the dragon from interfering.

Mulling over all this in his head, Tohru opened the door to the courtyard and went in—

“...!?”

A single girl was standing there.

It was as unexpected as a solitary flower blooming in the desert.

A small, modest flower bed had been set in the courtyard, but instead of flowers, there were only weeds. Almost as if to contrast the appearance the ruined flower bed gave off, the girl waited there; tidy, prim, proper.

“Who in the...?” There was a hint of tension in Tohru's voice.

Because he couldn't feel her presence at all.

An acquaintance of Guy's, perhaps?

Even when looking straight at her, he felt nothing indicating she was actually there.

She looked to be in her early teens, maybe about Chaika's age. Perhaps one or two years younger.

She wore a light-pink dress, and her long hair was tied up with red hair ornaments. She was cute, but it was a subdued kind of cute. Somewhat transient, almost—he got the impression of a pure maiden.

“...Um...” Tohru spoke up.

Yet the girl didn’t respond.

Who...in the world was she? He hadn’t felt anyone else’s presence in this house except Dominica’s, and he felt that way even now. There were, of course, ways to conceal your presence, but...it was definitely weird to not feel anything from her even though she was standing right in front of him.

“This is—”

As he inched closer to the girl, he stared at her, waiting for some sort of reaction. As he thought, she was ignoring him completely.

All she did was just stand there, staring out into empty space.

Almost as if—

“...Hm.”

Crouching down, Tohru grabbed a pebble lying on the ground, and using his index finger, flicked it towards the girl. The pebble headed straight for her—

“I knew it.”

It passed right through her.

The girl was an illusion. A mirage...no, more like a projection.

Tohru had heard of this...a device that projected a phantom. While it lacked an actual physical form, the device could make one believe that it really existed. It seemed like magic, but apparently the effect could be achieved with a simple apparatus. However, a projection was a projection, and so it was delicate enough that a mere change in the temperature or humidity of the environment around it would blur the image, giving it away.

“Could it be a portrait of someone?” Tohru muttered, knitting his eyebrows.

It was so bold—like a picture drawn with enough depth that you could reach out and touch it. Just out of curiosity’s sake, Tohru reached out his hand—

“Don’t touch her.”

He heard a quiet voice.

“...”

Tohru turned to look behind him.

Of course, he had felt a presence coming up behind him, but...

“Ah, no...I was...just...” Tohru faked a flustered demeanor.

Standing at the edge of the courtyard...was Dominica.

“My apologies.” Dominica shook her head, as if she had instantly regretted what she’d just said. “It’s not like you could touch her even if you tried, is it?”

“...Uh, no, I also apologize.” In an admirable gesture, Tohru lowered his head. “She’s just so beautiful, I...”

“‘Beautiful’, huh,” Dominica muttered. She closed her eyes, as if lost in thought. Then after a bit, she returned Tohru’s gaze and gave him a small smile.

“Thank you.”

“Who is she? A family member?”

Though he asked anyway, he already had a pretty good idea.

On the phantom girl, he could see resemblances to Dominica here and there. It could have been Dominica in her younger years, but although there were many similarities between the two, the overall feel she gave off was different. Dominica didn’t have the transient, flower-swaying-in-the-wind demeanor that this girl had. On the contrary—her impression was strong, like a towering tree firmly rooted in the earth.

After a brief, almost hesitant pause, she answered.

“Lucie Scoda. My younger sister.”

“I see.” Nodding, Tohru took another look at the illusion of Lucie.

In some respects, her figure reminded him almost of Chaika. What specifically about her that brought Chaika to mind, though, Tohru couldn’t put his finger on. Perhaps this similarity was one of the reasons Dominica was acting so affable towards them.

“...”

“ ... ”

Tohru and Dominica stayed silent.

The two stood there, staring at the illusion, when...

“You’re not going to ask?” Dominica asked in a quiet, weary voice.

As he had already confirmed, there was no one else living here. Dominica had said as much earlier, and he could tell from the lack of presence. Which meant that Dominica wasn’t living together with her sister.

She was expressly decorating this garden with her sister’s image.

There were a limited number of explanations for this behavior. Also, remembering the almost reflexive, vehement way in which she had prohibited a complete stranger from touching the illusion...that right there told the tale of how deep her fixation ran.

It was how one acted towards something that they would never again be able to hold.

Which meant...

“Did she pass away?”

“...That’s right.”

Dominica wore an expression of self-loathing.

She let out a single sigh—perhaps she actually felt a sense of relief at being asked—and continued.

“It was while I was off to war.”

“ ... ”

It was similar to when Tohru had told Chaika about his past, about the girl Jasmine. Perhaps she too had been wanting to confide in someone, spill it out to a complete stranger far removed from it all. Maybe this was even the reason she had saved Tohru’s group and even went out of her way to invite them to her home. Or, she could have harbored feelings of guilt after hearing Akari’s whopper of a tale, thinking that after hearing someone else’s secret, she needed to expose her own in order for her feelings to maintain equilibrium.

“My sister was everything to me. And yet, she perished. I could not protect her.”

Tohru offered a concise “What a pity.”

He realized that words intended to comfort were cheap, and could actually even trample on the receiver’s heart even further. Even a million words couldn’t bring the dead back to life. Therefore, keeping your mouth shut was also a form of paying respects.

“I became a dragoon cavalier because I wanted my sister to live in safety and luxury. Our parents died early on, so it was just two sisters, one younger and one older, practically living shoulder-to-shoulder...”

She laughed self-derisively.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it? I became a dragoon cavalier for her sake, and yet it was precisely because I had become one that I couldn’t be near to protect her.”

Dragoon cavaliers had incredible strength.

In terms of the battlefield, it was their impenetrable defense in particular that made them perfect for the front lines.

Take just one dragoon cavalier out of a unit or even an entire army, and their chances of winning would decrease dramatically. It was most likely a situation where regardless of her own feelings, there was no way she could leave. Just her being there saved numerous people from death. It didn’t matter how much she longed to see her sister’s face; if she left for a reason like that, she might as well have been ordering her comrades to die.

Could that also...be why she lives in seclusion?

After having her most precious thing snatched away from her, she probably couldn’t give a damn about a countess’s authority or a dragoon cavalier’s renown.

“The Scoda family was...a fallen family of cavaliers to begin with.”

With a groan, she began to tell the story.

“My father went to war and never returned, and my mother died of illness... our land was small, and we didn’t have the luxury of hired hands. Our family

was literally hanging on by a thread, ready to snap at any moment. With just us left, even the villagers looked down on the Scoda family. They would neglect to pay taxes and such...it was a hard life.”

No matter how much their revenue dwindled, a count had to live like a count. They weren't allowed to live like commoners. This also caused the Scodas to continue to lose respect in the villagers' eyes. It was only out of fear that they continued to comply.

But...once Dominica had left for war, all that remained of the family was a single girl not even yet of age. And apparently there were those within the village that saw this as an opportunity to capitalize on.

They barged into their estate and demanded that, for the good of the population, she was to hand over everything she owned. She was just barely hanging on the family's dignity as a countess, and yet the men determined that she had been living in extravagance. They asserted that while the rest of the territory was just barely getting along, the Scodas had been living in the lap of luxury all the while.

At a loss, Lucie gave them just about everything she had.

But the items entrusted to her that had accumulated over generations, like the inherited swords and suit of armor, as well as the works of art bestowed upon them by the crown, she had refused to part with. They were the last vestiges of the cavalier pedigree the Scoda family embodied. This was the family her mother had died protecting and that her older sister had inherited, and now it was up to her to protect it at all costs. That had to be what was running through her mind at the time.

But...there was no way the villagers could understand that.

Enraged at such absurdity, the villagers lost all sense of reason, ganged up on her, and beat her. Having been hit in vital spots, the conditioned of the downed girl worsened, and just like that, she passed away.

“You may have already heard this from the villagers at Ratison, but...”

Her self-deprecating smile warped.

“After learning the truth...I murdered all the villagers that had laid their hands

on my sister.”

Aha, so that’s the “villager-massacre” I heard about,

Tohru realized.

Dominica’s actions could be seen as punishment towards those who raised their fists to a member of the countess’s family, but even though she was a count, the slaughter was so one-sided that a trial wasn’t even necessary, and the act was seen as one born from mental derangement. It was even worse since Dominica was a dragoon cavalier. The murdered villagers hadn’t even had a chance to resist.

“I was prepared to suffer the consequences...but, ironically enough, I had earned a number of accolades from the war’s final battle, and so the crown acquitted me. I ended up receiving ownership of this town’s land, and so I moved here.”

“I see.”

That was likely also the reason Dominica had no interest in governing this land. Having just had the land foisted upon her, and having even lost her beloved sister in the end, of course she would have a

laissez-faire attitude towards it.

“...No, I apologize.”

Having finished recounting her circumstances, Dominica shook her head weakly.

“This has nothing to do with you. Please forgive me, and consider your lodgings paid.”

“No, think nothing of it,” Tohru replied.

But...

What’s with this...unpleasant feeling?

Tohru was mulling something over in the corner of his mind.

Dominica probably wasn’t lying. She wouldn’t have had any reason to lie here.

But...

Is it because of the time elapsed?

She was recounting this story awfully matter-of-factly, almost as if she was a storyteller offering him a fairy tale. Having encountered tragedy, she had given herself over to her anger and murdered a number of villagers, and yet Tohru couldn't feel that outburst of emotion anywhere within her now.

Perhaps time really did heal all wounds.

So after several years, she had managed to come to terms with her own sister's death?

Or...

Could it be because...she's a dragoon cavalier?

Could a dragon's magic also be able to heal wounds of the heart?

Or perhaps becoming one with the dragoon meant that you forfeited your emotions as a human?

"By the way, Miss Scoda," Tohru began, trying to make it seem like he had just hit upon the idea, "you're a dragoon cavalier, correct?"

"Yes, what of it?" Dominica tilted her head.

Looking around the courtyard, Tohru asked her the question that had been bugging him the most.

"I don't see the dragoon around anywhere. Where is it?"

It was in the name—a dragoon cavalier was one with the dragon.

Once in effect, a dragoon cavalier's "pledge", or the pact they made with their dragoon, could only be dispelled if either one of them happened to die. Even if they were some distance away from each other, the pact would still remain, so they didn't have to be together 24/7...but even so, Tohru had heard that in most cases the dragon and the dragoon cavalier acted together.

But Tohru hadn't sensed hide nor hair of a dragon anywhere in this mansion.

Of course, the dragon probably hadn't died. Tohru and the others had seen her use the dragon's transformation magic to change clothes, after all.

"Ah, that..." Dominica nodded, her expression somewhat indiscernible. After

appearing deep in thought for a moment...

“Due to some...circumstances, it’s a bit further away from here.”

That was all she said.

It seemed she wasn’t going to divulge the details of those circumstances.

“Well, it’s actually more convenient this way.”

”And...why is that?”

“Normal people see dragons as a species of Feyra. If a dragon was in your vicinity, you people would be on edge to the point of being unable to sleep. Even on the battlefield, all the soldiers made camp as far away from me as they could.”

“But I’ve heard that dragoons are a different story...?”

Although they all fell under the same umbrella of “Feyra,” the dragoon and the kraken were fundamentally different from the other Feyra in that they possessed high intelligence. Because of that, there were aspects of them that could not be controlled. Looking at it from the reverse, though, having such intelligent creatures meant rather than one-sided domination and servitude, you could enter into a cooperative relationship with them, and things like pacts were possible.

“It’s the same.” Dominica shook her head. “An aberration is an aberration. It doesn’t matter if the dragon has feelings or not. That’s why humans are—ah, never mind.”

It seemed like she was about to say something...but Dominica stopped right there and shook her head, as if to nip that thought in the bud.

“At any rate, no need to concern yourself with it.”

“...Sure.” Tohru offered a vague reply.

She said “don’t concern yourself with it,” but there was no way he couldn’t.

If it came down to having to fight Dominica in order to steal the remains, the fact that her dragoon was off in some unknown place meant that they might be able to sneak-attack her after all.

However, there was still a problem. They didn't know for sure whether or not she actually had the remains.

"Oh, by the way, Miss Scoda."

"What?"

"Just a bit ago, you mentioned that you received certain accolades during the war."

"Indeed. A reward for continuing to fight almost to my last breath."

"What, specifically, were they?"

"I was there during the battle for the capital of the Gaz Empire."

She said it right out.

But rather than pride, she spoke of it almost with embarrassment, with a despondent expression on her face. It must have been because of what happened to her sister. There was no way she could be proud of her accomplishments after that.

"I received this land from His Majesty as a result of that battle. However, to be honest, now that Lucie's gone owning this land is nothing but a nuisance."

"Society, power, fame, assets...none of it matters to you, huh?"

"...Exactly. I have no need for any of it."

This too, Dominica affirmed succinctly.

Then...

There was a chance she had already given away the remains.

Or, rather, if she hadn't...then they could possibly strike a deal with her to obtain them.

"So, what about it?" Dominica asked with a puzzled expression. It seemed she hadn't seen through to the real purpose of the question.

"Oh, nothing, it's just that...for a countess and noble, you're rather...you know."

"'I live rather plainly.' Is that what you want to say?" A slight smile appeared

on her face.

“Putting it frankly, then yes. I was wondering why that was.”

“Truthfully, I no longer have anything that I desire,” she said, indifferent. “However, even now, if I was able to wish for anything I wanted in the world, it’d have to be...”

At that point, her voice trailed off.

As though she were reminiscing, she stared at the sky with faraway eyes.

“It would be...?” Tohru urged her on.

But she just stood there, seemingly lost for an answer, and then at last...

“I know it’s ridiculous, but...”

Her gaze returned to Tohru.

“I’d like to stand on the battlefield again, one more time.”

“...”

The end of the long war had finally brought an era of peace.

Tohru had thought there were probably only a small fraction of the populace who were like him, sick of peace—or perhaps they were actually the majority?—but even so, he was not expecting to come across someone else who also wished to plunge the world into war once more.

Even less so, someone who had aided in the Gaz Empire’s collapse.

Even Chaika didn’t necessarily wish for war—

“Oh yes. As for meals...”

Suddenly changing gears, Dominica spoke.

“Ah...yes.”

“To be honest, I don’t have any ingredients. I go out to hunt on occasion and smoke wild boar or deer meat, but that’s about it.”

“No need to worry there. We will take care of ourselves. Thank you for your concern on our behalf.”

Tohru bowed his head. In truth there were some preserved rations still in the Svetrana, so surely they could portion out and make do with their current ingredients and foodstuffs for at least a week.

“I see. Then, feel free to use the kitchen at your leisure.”

“Understood.” Tohru nodded.

But...

What the hell? Yeah, this is definitely weird.

But of course, he couldn't put into words exactly what was so strange.

In the back of Tohru's mind, a number of misgivings were flitting around, not yet able to manifest fully.

Part 3

The room Dominica had lent them was on the inner second floor.

“But really, what’s up with this mansion?”

Their conversation in the courtyard was over, and Tohru was in the process of surveying the mansion once again.

Yes, it was small, but aside from that the structure was nothing unusual. It was essentially the kind of mansion any noble would own. Saboteurs like Tohru would undertake assassination missions on occasion, so they possessed a general knowledge of the layout of these mansions.

However, there was one unusual point.

The mansion felt like it had barely been lived in. The walls and pillars looked brand-new, like the kind you would find in a home that had just been built; however, while the floor had no visible scuffs or scrapes, it was completely covered in dust. It looked almost as if it had been abandoned after its construction, and had had no tenants since. Perhaps—none of the rooms except Dominica’s had ever even been set foot in. Thinking about what Dominica had said about no longer having any interest in fame or fortune, as long as there was a roof over her head so she could rest without worrying about rain or wind, anything else was probably trivial. For her, that probably wasn’t so unusual.

Although...

“Something’s...still bugging me...”

Muttering to himself, Tohru opened the door to his designated guest room.

Though comparatively small, this was a noble’s mansion after all, and so the guest room was still quite large. The entirety of the dilapidated shack Tohru and Akari stayed in at Del Solant could probably fit in this one room. While there were no decorations, there was a bed, a set of candle stands, and a writing desk; in other words, the bare essentials for one to stay the night.

However, this room, too, was like the others in that it looked like it hadn’t

been used in years.

A thick layer of dust coated the entire area, and even the air felt unclean. It wasn't the kind of unclean you could take care of by just cracking the window open a bit, either—it was the kind of moldy, musty nastiness characteristic of an abandoned building.

And in the midst of it...

“...”

Tohru scowled.

The area around the bed, pushed up against the wall, was oddly immaculate.

It was the only area that had been cleaned, as if it was the only part of the room that mattered.

It had been quite a while since Tohru's group last had the opportunity able to sleep soundly with a roof over their head, so it wasn't like Tohru didn't understand the feeling of finally obtaining a good bed.

However.

“...Akari.”

“What is it, Nii-sama?”

Akari, standing at the bedside, replied to him.

“May I ask you something?”

“Absolutely, Nii-sama. If it's a question from my beloved brother, I will answer, no matter how embarrassing. Ask away, from the color of my underwear to when my safe day is,” Akari said, gripping her fist tightly for some reason.

Her enthusiasm was clearly misplaced.

“And why are you assuming that it's something embarrassing?”

“Because you prefaced your question with “may I.” That means it's something I'd normally be embarrassed to answer.”

“What use would I have for knowing something like the color of someone's

underwear, anyway?”

“You’re not interested, Nii-sama?”

“I’m not interested in your underwear, at least.”

“I see. You mean to say ‘it’s not the underwear that’s important, it’s what’s inside them.’

“As if!”

“By the way, currently I’m not wearing any.”

“—!?”

“That was a joke,” Akari said in her deadpan voice.

“This

is what I want to ask you about!” Heaving a sigh, he pointed to the bed.

The bed itself was your normal, everyday bed. It was a canopy bed, but that was a common piece of furniture for nobles—the bed wasn’t what had him concerned.

“Why are there two pillows here?”

“Because someone put them there.”

“And who was it?”

“Me.”

“Then it’s okay if I get rid of one of these, right?”

“If that’s what you desire, Nii-sama, I won’t stop you, but two people on one pillow sounds awfully cramped.”

“...” Tohru glared at Akari with half-lidded eyes.

But Akari, unfazed, brazenly returned Tohru’s glare.

“Nii-sama, perhaps you’ve forgotten, but we’re supposed to be

wuvvy-duvvy

siblings tangled up in a forbidden love, chased from our hometown and on the run from our family.”

“...Don’t say *wuvvy-duvvy*.”

“Kidding.”

“Of course you are.”

“Kind of.”

“Say you’re *completely* kidding!” Tohru let out a groan.

“At any rate, we can’t let that dragoon cavalier suspect anything, so I propose that we need to make our “immoral sibling” ruse as thorough as possible.”

That was why Akari suggested they sleep in the same room and the same bed.

“There’s no need to go so far in a secluded room like this! It’s just overacting at that point!”

Then, he looked around the room.

“Actually, where’s Chaika?”

“The next room over.” Akari pointed to the wall.

“We have a lot of things we need to discuss. Which room would be better to gather in, though...” Tohru muttered.

“Probably this one. It’s a double room, in name at least.”

Akari must have sensed that it was now time to be serious, as she replied immediately.

“By the way, I did a basic check for any voice tubes or hidden traps, and this room seems to be safe. I would bet the next room over is as well,” she added.

Before spending the night somewhere, saboteurs would habitually first check the area for any tricks or traps. Well, it was less a habit and more a rule. In more extreme cases, there could be an assassin lurking underneath the bed, voice tubes for intercepting messages, magical surveillance devices, or other cleverly-hidden traps that would go unnoticed if the room wasn’t searched first.

“Okay, I’ll go call her.” He went back out into the hallway.

*

“Good person, Dominica Scoda.”

That was what Chaika had to say.

“Well, you’re not wrong, but...”

Tohru crossed his arms and let out a sigh.

He had called Chaika over from the adjacent room, and Tohru had just finished giving a suggestion for a plan.

“Incredibly nice,” she said, hitting the bed for emphasis.

It was just as Chaika said—Dominica Scoda had been very accommodating towards them. Of course, Dominica was unaware of their true background and objective, but even so, for a couple of coincidentally acquainted strangers she was really rolling out the red carpet. Ordinarily, one wouldn’t even open their door to someone who had such an unclear background.

“I think the reason she’s being so nice is that *you’re* here, Chaika.” Tohru declared.

“Mui?”

“During the war—no, directly after it, it seems—she ended up losing her sister. Look out there, you can even see it from this room...that thing in the garden.” He pointed to the window.

Of course, “that thing” he was referring to was the hologram of Lucie Scoda.

“When you put the two of you side by side, you look similar. And you pretty much look the same age.”

“They do look somewhat alike,” Akari agreed, looking out the window.

“She blames herself for heading out to war instead of staying to protect her sister. Because of that, it seems she’s lost all interest in fame, fortune, or power. It could also be why she seems so indifferent to everything.”

If she had the mindset that nothing mattered anymore, of course she wouldn’t have any qualms opening her home up to complete strangers. It also followed that she wouldn’t care about their background.

“But Nii-sama, when did you find this all out?”

Akari looked away from the window and back to Tohru.

“In the garden just now.”

“That’s my Nii-sama.” She nodded and crossed her arms in a display of what looked like admiration. “You sure are a master of getting women to let their guard down.”

“Is that praise or an insult!?”

“It’s praise, of course. Imagine, me insulting my beloved Nii-sama.” She shook her head dismissively, but then she took her fist in her palm, as if she just hit upon something. “No, wait, Nii-sama. If you actually really love being insulted, then this humble Akari Acura will give all she has to make you the target of constant disparage.”

“Just be quiet already.”

“It goes without saying, but binding, whipping, kicking and trampling are all on the table if necessary.”

“Just shut up. I’m begging you, shut up,” groaned Tohru.

“But wow, Dominica Scoda has a thing for her sister, huh.”

“I. Said. Shut. Up. Don’t lump her in with your warped character. It’s a normal relationship. Normal.”

The love that Dominica and Lucie shared was probably innocuous, familial love.

At least, it wasn’t the type of love that included binding, whipping, kicking, or trampling

, he thought. At least, he *wanted*

to believe that. But it wasn’t like he knew their circumstances anyway.

“*At any rate.*” He cleared his throat to indicate they were going back to the topic at hand. “You’re right, Chaika. Dominica Scoda isn’t a bad person. Treating us the way she did was an altruistic deed. She accommodates complete strangers...almost like a saint. However...” Tohru pointed right at Chaika’s face. “Have you forgotten, ‘Chaika Gaz?’ This dragoon cavalier was most likely one of your father’s enemies.”

“ ... ”

Chaika’s expression clouded over.

Yes. Whether she had a piece of his corpse or not, this person had been present at the battle for the Gaz Empire’s capital, and it was highly likely that she was one of the heroes who had a direct stake in crushing him.

“ ... ”

Chaika appeared to be sinking further and further into despair. Most likely, after having the truth that she was trying so hard to avoid thrust right in front of her, she was now getting depressed—even if it was a bit late.

She curled herself up into the fetal position.

“Um...well, you know...”

Tohru stumbled over what to say. He hadn’t expected it to hit her
this

hard. Sure, it was a statement that was intended to make her reflect upon her actions, but it now almost looked like he was bullying her.

“I, I’m not saying you have to hate her...necessarily...”

“ ... ”

“Ahh, dammit, what do you want from me, an apology!?”

Tohru glanced over at Akari, hoping she would rescue him from this unpleasant atmosphere.

“I see now.” With her arms crossed, Akari gave a big nod. “So this is your “Throw Them Into Turmoil” technique. Not bad.”

“It’s nothing to be impressed over!”

Tohru had reached his yelling limit.

But then Chaika—

“I, apologize. To Tohru.”

And though a bit forced, she smiled.

“Tohru, always thinking. Always trying, hardest. Not in the wrong.”

As always, her grasp on the common language of the continent was less than stellar, so sometimes it was hard to parse out what she meant....but basically, Tohru understood that she was trying to say “Tohru is always thinking about what’s best for me and trying harder than anyone else, so there’s no way he’s the one in the wrong.” It seemed that she was trying to console him, or rather, just be nice to him.

“Ah...” Tohru scratched his cheek.

Putting his embarrassment aside for now...

“So anyway, I take that to mean that you’re against this plan?”

“Muu...” Chaika looked conflicted.

“Even though it’s pretty much our best chance of pulling this off...”

Tohru had proposed that they employ the use of drugs.

To be more specific, poison.

They had to confirm whether or not she had the remains. But what would happen after that? That was the problem.

Of course, Tohru had anticipated Chaika’s “good person” part of her response, so he also had been considering a simple negotiation for the remains.

Dominica, who no longer cared for the world or its material possessions, might also see the remains as inconsequential. The possibility that she might just hand them over wasn’t zero.

But, how should he reply when she asked why they wanted the remains of Emperor Gaz?

Society widely regarded the Gaz Empire as “the root of all evil.” Though she was effectively retired, if a dragoon cavalier “good person” knew that the daughter of the “Taboo Emperor” was right in front of her, would she change her tune? Tohru didn’t want to find out.

And he also had to think about the chance that she might refuse.

If that happened...she’d be even harder to deal with than she is now.

She would definitely regard Tohru, Akari, and Chaika with suspicion.

Sneak attack or not, an alert dragoon cavalier was nigh-impossible to defeat.

And as for a weak point...the woman had practically become a hermit due to losing her beloved sister, so Tohru couldn't even begin to imagine what would rile her up at this point.

So Tohru determined that the safest option was to put all their eggs in one basket and strike while she was still unaware...which is what led him to propose the plan.

However, Tohru had no idea how much poison, or any drug for that matter, it would take to affect a dragoon cavalier. Their recovery magic might not only cover the skin, but also reach the nerves and internal organs. Not only were there few dragoon cavaliers to begin with, but the full spectrum of their abilities was a closely-guarded military secret. As such, it was difficult to tell how much of the information Tohru had heard was actually genuine.

"An amount way over the lethal dose" was probably a good guess.

If they used a substance that paralyzed the nerves, it should render her immobile for a while even if it didn't kill her. Dragoon cavaliers were beings that wouldn't die unless you cut their head from their body—but perhaps that also meant complicated areas like the brain took longer to heal, or maybe weren't able to heal at all.

"Well, in the end, we're just saboteurs." Tohru sighed. "We're not picky about achieving our objectives, but in this case this objective...isn't ours."

"...Tohru?"

Chaika blinked her violet eyes.

In a tone that left absolutely no room for confusion, Tohru said the following.

"When you get right down to it, our objective is whatever you want it to be, Master."

"Tohru...I..." A mixture of surprise, joy, fear, and worry appeared on Chaika's face as she stared at Tohru.

He then made it a point to deliver his next words coldly, in an attempt to stifle

his own sentiments to the best of his ability.

“So if you say “let’s not do this,” if you’d rather prioritize letting the “good person” Dominica Scoda live over your own goal of gathering the remnants, then we have no right to stop you.”

When something is gained, something else is lost.

That held true even in a recovery mission.

Something is always used up, whether it be time, money, honor, fellowship, love, or trust.

“I can come up with the methods, but it’s up to you, our client, to decide whether to implement them.”

“...”

Chaika looked hesitantly at Tohru, and then Akari. Yet Akari only nodded. She shared Tohru’s opinion.

“Well...you don’t have to decide right this instant.” Truth be told, she was hard to look at right now. Tohru averted his eyes from the downcast Chaika—a half-baked action coming from a saboteur who made it a principle to utilize their spirit, technique and physical condition as tools to fit any situation.

“However, we probably don’t have that much time. That cavalier’s group will catch up to us soon enough.”

“...Understood.” Eyes still cast downwards, a crease formed between her eyebrows.

However...

Well, an immediate answer is probably too much to ask for

, Tohru reasoned.

Chaika’s hesitation was likely born from the same weakness that afflicts a soldier before and after their first battle. It wasn’t just soldiers—anyone on the battlefield, be it saboteur or cavalier, likely went through the same thing.

Up until that point, the “enemy” had been an abstract being, a target of destruction in countless practice drills. But on the battlefield, staring down a

flesh-and-blood enemy, any preparation and resolve immediately flew out the window. Not only that, but the techniques you had spit up blood to master, practically etched into your body, were lost to the wind.

Of course, some suffered less extreme setbacks. However, the initial shock of a situation with a high possibility of death did have somewhat of an adverse affect on one's fighting prowess.

Yes. The enemy was no abstraction, nor object. They were living, breathing humans. That was obvious, but knowing it and experiencing it were two different things.

The raid at Del Solant had most likely been Chaika's first recovery mission. That was the only piece of the remains that she had, at least. Therefore, she should've had little to no prior experience facing off with an enemy, much less stealing from one. Not to mention, the count displayed unbridled killing intent towards Tohru's group, so she hadn't yet experienced the pangs of conscience.

But Dominica Scoda was a different story

They had come across her unprepared, and she had even rescued them. They had been recipients of her goodwill.

Therefore Chaika was unable to steel her resolve to view this woman as her enemy, even going so far as to call her a "good person."

That in itself, Tohru thought, was not a bad thing. In fact, it was an admirable characteristic, a wholly human sentiment.

But even so—

"..."

Clearly glum, Chaika's gaze dropped to her knees.

*

I'm not sure if it's suitable enough fare for a count of your stature, but..."

With that apology, Tohru set Dominica's plate down in front of her.

They were all gathered in the Scoda residence's dining room. Tohru, Akari and Chaika had invited Dominica to dinner.

The mansion's kitchen had obviously been neglected for years. From the oven to the kitchen utensils, everything had been coated in dust. Tohru and Akari, having tidied up to a point where the kitchen was usable again, had cooked up a simple meal using ingredients brought over from the Svetrana. And Chaika, ousted from the kitchen because her clumsy, accident-prone nature ensured she would be nothing but a hindrance, had been in charge of cleaning the dining room area, which had been just as dusty as all the other rooms.

"Well, it's true I am a count, but before that I was sleeping and eating meals on the battlefield. Far be it from me to possess such an ostentatious palate. On the contrary, I find it to be quite nostalgic." Dominica smiled.

In front of her was a slab of dried meat rehydrated in bone marrow soup, stir-fried vegetables, scrambled eggs, and sliced bread. A quick, painless meal, yet one that still managed to include all the necessary nutrients. It was indeed reminiscent of a meal you might be served on the battlefield.

"We are so grateful." Akari and Tohru both bowed their heads in unison.

However—

Where the hell does she normally eat? That was bugging him.

As aforementioned, it was evident that neither the kitchen nor the dining room had been used in a number of years. No, not just that. Judging from the amount of dust over the whole household, it was like the whole building was deserted. It wasn't just filthy; it was as if

no one was even living here.

"..."

As Chaika brought her own portion of bread to her mouth and chewed, she would periodically glance over at Dominica and then immediately avert her eyes. She was clearly feeling uneasy, probably still torn over whether or not to risk talking it out with Dominica and lay their circumstances bare in the process.

Of course, if Dominica was to agree and hand over the remains, they couldn't ask for a better outcome. But if she refused, their hand would be forced and they'd have to face her on extremely unfavorable conditions. Depending on the circumstances, they could end up dead. Taking that into account, the best

option really was to poison her, and then confirm if she had what they were looking for.

But...

“...Mui?”

Chaika tilted her head, something having just come to her attention.

Dominica’s fork hand had frozen in midair, and she was staring directly at Chaika.

“Ah, please forgive me.” Dominica smiled wryly. “I was just lost in thought. My little sister, see, would have looked similar to you were she still alive.”

“Little...sister...”

“Oh, but it must be quite unpleasant to be told you look like someone who’s already passed on. My apologies.”

“No problem, no problem!” Chaika waved her hands in a fluster.

“I’m aware how ridiculous this sounds, but...I wasn’t with my sister when she died. By the time I returned, she was already in the ground. So sometimes I’ll find myself thinking that she’s going to appear right in front of me the next day. The height of idiocy, really,” Dominica said.

“Understand...can sympathize. Greatly.” Chaika nodded with agreement.

Shit...

thought Tohru beside her. Chaika was showing empathy towards Dominica. Tohru was thinking that as long as Chaika gave a definite answer, even if it was “let’s give up on the remains” or “if she refuses, we can just explain everything and reveal our backgrounds”, it was going to be fine—he would come up with a countermeasure for any setbacks. But in Chaika’s case, simply agonizing over it might not be enough for her to come to a decision. When all was said and done, she wasn’t the type to force others to her will for her own convenience—in other words, she was a “good person.”

So Chaika never witnessed her father’s death, either.

Losing a father and losing a sister were two different things, but there was no

helping the fact that the two were now bonding over their similar circumstances. A family member had died, and they had been unaware.

...So then.

It was becoming clearer that at this rate, Chaika wasn't going to reach a decision any time soon. Gillette's group would catch up to them, and he couldn't guarantee the girl's safety after that.

"Miss Scoda." Tohru stopped eating and addressed her directly.

"What is it?"

"May I ask you a question, please?"

"If you have something you need answered, ask away." Toward Tohru's overtly formal tone, she seemed almost wary.

Tohru closed his eyes, hardening his resolve.

And then—

"You wouldn't happen to possess one of Emperor Gaz's remains, would you?"

"—!?"

The one who looked the most surprised at Tohru's question was actually Chaika. Akari just went on scarfing down food as though Tohru hadn't even spoken. She had been with Tohru for as long as he could remember, though, so perhaps she had predicted this outcome.

"I heard that you're one of the heroes of that war, the ones who directly subjugated Emperor Gaz. I also heard that even though it was officially announced that Emperor Gaz's body was incinerated in an explosion, in truth the heroes divided up the pieces of his corpse, each a valuable source of magical power, and each took a piece home with them..."

"Tohru—you..." Dominica raised her eyebrows as she stared at Tohru. She was surprised, but there was no trace of anger or hostility on her face.

"...Supposing that were true..." She gave a slight pause. "Just how did you get that information?"

"Because one of the Gaz Empire's own is right under your nose," Tohru

replied.

When he said it, he paid attention to where Dominica's eyes moved—however, she didn't especially look in Chaika's direction. It seemed that she was at least unaware that Chaika was the daughter of the Taboo Emperor.

But then—

The count at Del Solant recognized Chaika. But Dominica's never seen her before, even though they're both heroes...what's that discrepancy mean? Was Chaika really not there during the attack after all?

"I see." Tohru's thoughts were interrupted by Dominica's voice. "And—say I did have a piece of the remains. What are you going to do about it?"

She narrowed her eyes.

Even now, he couldn't feel any hostility or killing intent from her, nor did it seem like her mood had worsened. Her gaze was quiet and cool, as if she were ascertaining Tohru and the rest of them.

"Would you allow us to have it?"

"...You do realize that *if*

such a thing did exist, it would be worth more than gold itself, right?"

Arthur Gaz's remains weren't only valued as an excellent source of magical power. Just from the rarity of such an item, people would want it no matter the cost. It was forbidden in the majority of countries to traffick human bodies for their magical power, but if the price was right, they were willing to go to any lengths of deception.

"We're aware of how ridiculous this claim may seem."

"Whatever could you want it for?" Dominica asked, her eyes boring through him.

Tohru hesitated for a split second. He could, of course, come up with a plausible set of lies. But Dominica wasn't asking about the particulars of their circumstances. She was most likely asking the same fundamental question that Tohru had asked to Chaika earlier—namely,

What's your objective?

"There's a person dear to me."

Tohru said it outright.

"We need it to complete this person's objective."

"...!"

On the edge of his vision—he could see Chaika, wide-eyed, looking at him.

"Not for yourself?"

"My objective is to complete that person's objective."

"...Hm."

She nodded—and then, in the next instant.

The tip of her sword headed right for Tohru's face.

There was probably only a single sheet of cloth...no, a sheet of paper's length distance between the sword's sharp point and Tohru's forehead.

"...!"

Chaika leapt from her seat in astonishment and Akari readied her guard...but Tohru himself didn't budge an inch.

Because Dominica's attack was devoid of intent to kill. If she
had

wanted to kill him, though, he wasn't confident he could have dodged in time. In the first place couldn't even determine when she had "created" her sword.

"I knew you weren't just some amateur," she said.

"Huh, so you *were* watching us during the orthrus fight. Still—"

With the cat out of the bag, there was no further need for Tohru to keep up the formal act.

"Honestly, that was faster than expected. Color me surprised. You didn't even chant a spell."

"Don't move a muscle." She brought the tip of her sword forward slightly,

grazing Tohru's forehead.

It didn't draw blood—yet. It had merely slipped under the elastic of the outermost layer of skin.

But if Dominica's hand were to waver one bit, the sword would pierce his forehead and blood would drip out.

"Your sister over there seems to be experienced as well. Assassins, perhaps? No, you don't seem to be the cavalier or soldier type. Which only leaves... mercenaries, or perhaps saboteurs."

"We're saboteurs."

As he replied, his gaze was not fixed on the sword nigh-penetrating his own forehead, but the equally sharp glare piercing him from the other end of the sword.

"But if you're saboteurs, I half-expected you to poison and assassinate me, then search the place at your leisure. I hear there's no such thing as foul play in your vocabulary?" Dominica retracted her sword.

"There's a reason for that. This way is much faster." Tohru shrugged.
"Naturally, I'm not thrilled about the prospect of facing off against a dragoon cavalier. So I'll ask you again. If you really do possess the remains, won't you hand them over? They should be of no consequence to someone who has no interest in the world, its powers, or material capital, correct?"

"..."

After glaring at Tohru for a while, she turned to look at Chaika. The girl's silver hair was reflected in her lucid crimson eyes.

"...?"

Chaika flinched a bit in surprise...but perhaps not wanting to have Tohru take the whole fall, she mustered all her willpower and stared right back at Dominica.

And then—

"I do indeed have a piece of the remains."

Dominica said. Then she told them the next part quietly.

“But you will not have it...unless you can pry it from my dead body, you mongrels of war.”

Chapter 4: The Limited War

Part 1

This atmosphere's way too heavy,

Tohru thought. Having stared at his lap for a while now, he raised his gaze.

“...”

It was just after he had announced their true intentions to Dominica in the dining room.

After grabbing all the necessary items from the Svetrana parked out front, Tohru, Akari and Chaika had returned to their room. Dominica had said that they would have to “pry it from her dead body,” so there were no two ways about it—they would have to fight a dragoon cavalier. If they were frugal with their methods here, there was no way they’d come out on top. They would need to get their equipment into tip-top shape; it was of course necessary to take stock of everyone’s abilities before coming up with a plan.

But all that aside...

“...!”

His eyes inevitably met hers—Chaika’s.

The girl quickly looked away, choosing instead to engross herself in the maintenance of her Gundo, disassembled and lined up in pieces before her... however, he could tell her heart wasn’t in it, or rather, it was somewhere else. Tohru knew next to nothing about the design of Gundo, but he was pretty sure there wasn’t any point to attaching and removing the same part, over and over again.

Well, I can’t blame her, though.

Tohru heaved a sigh.

The one time Tohru gave Chaika the authority to make the final decision, he had gone ahead and decided to set up a battle with Dominica without Chaika’s

consent...was probably how it looked to Chaika. Of course she would feel betrayed.

Of course, his decision had been for her benefit. He'd determined that if things went on the way they had been Chaika would never reach a decision, so he'd taken it upon himself to play the role of the villain...but he didn't expect Chaika to understand that much.

When all was said and done, Chaika was just a little girl.

Not only that, but she had been a *bona fide*

princess until the Gaz Empire collapsed. Expecting her to see through to the intentions of a mere commoner was asking too much. She was a completely different breed from a saboteur like Tohru or Akari, for whom it was customary to not only read someone's thoughts, but also guide them in the most favorable direction befitting their own circumstances.

"Hey, Chaika."

"Mui!?" Her body jolted when he called her name.

Ever so timidly, she raised her head once more—and with violet, upturned eyes, she looked back at Tohru. "Nervous" wasn't the word for it—she looked more like a wild animal on high alert.

It kind of...made Tohru feel a twinge of pain, as well. There was no need to be so on guard, was there?

Of course, playing the bad guy didn't bother him in the least. Such was the fate of a saboteur.

However, if this misunderstanding continued, it would affect their performance in all sorts of ways when it came time to fight.

The opponent was a dragoon cavalier—not one that Tohru and Akari could face by themselves. They absolutely needed magic support...and for that reason, they had to come to a mutual understanding, or at least dispel the current misunderstanding, before things got worse.

And then, as usual, we have the issue of Akari.

Tohru stole a glance at the edge of the room.

Akari was facing the wall, sprawled out on the floor like a corpse.

“ ... ”

She had been like this ever since they got back to the room.

He couldn't see her expression since she was facing away from him, but he guessed she was probably pouting. In exchange for being expressionless, every once in awhile she would behave in a way that was incredibly easy to understand, or rather, immature.

Tohru had no idea what had pissed her off so much, but he knew if he didn't resolve this as well, it would be equally bad.

That said...

“Sorry for going ahead and saying things of my own accord, but...”

“...?” Chaika, looking surprised for some reason, blinked at Tohru. “D... Denied.” She shook her head at last.

A tinge of scarlet appeared on her white face, as if something had agitated her.

That must be her angry face, Tohru thought, and he felt a tad bit dejected.

“But...well, it was necessary.”

“Nece...ssary?” Chaika parroted, increasingly tightening her guard.

Steeling himself, Tohru slowly spoke his next words in a remonstrating tone.

You were thinking, *I don't want to have to fight Dominica*, weren't you?”

“ ... ”

A dumbfounded expression suddenly appeared on her face.

“

I have to get the remains, but I also don't want to fight Dominica, because she's a good person. But I'm also unsure about stealing them from her and escaping. Therefore, how about we just be honest and ask her if she'll give them to us? Well, perhaps, but if she refuses we won't be able to sneak attack her, and that would make gathering the remains even harder.

Something along those lines, right?”

Tohru paused there to check Chaika’s reaction. Of course, she had both eyes wide open in blank amazement. Almost like his words had been completely contrary to her expectations. What had she been expecting him to say? Well, it looked like she had lowered her guard for now, though. Determining as such, Tohru continued on.

“Even if we had had infinite time to spare, you would’ve probably never been able to come to a decision.”

“...”

“Hesitation is a perfectly natural, human response. But Gillette’s group could still be on our tail. Time was of the essence. So I went ahead and made an executive decision. It wasn’t like I was trying to slight you, ok?”

“...”

She stayed silent. What did that mean? Also, her eyes were as wide as saucers now.

Then—

“...Fuu.”

She let out a long breath all of a sudden.

That was not the reaction Tohru had expected.

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you mad that I overwrote your judgement?” Tohru asked, his brows furrowing.

“D...denied!” Chaika shook her head, flustered.

“Then what gives? Why are you looking at me so hatefully?”

“Hate, reproach, denied.”

After shaking her head again to complement her denial, Chaika hung her head. Her white cheeks were becoming scarlet.

“Then what the hell is it? I have no idea...”

“Nii-sama.”

The voice came from behind him suddenly. This time it was Tohru's turn to give a start.

Akari should have still been lying on the floor like a corpse—and yet at some point, she had gotten directly behind him.

“W-What?” Tohru asked, looking over his shoulder at Akari.

A heat wave of vigor, like an intent to kill, was emanating from her whole being for some reason.

What in the hell could have gotten her this riled up?

Tohru wondered.

“I'd like to confirm something with you.”

“Huh? Oh, if it's about our plan, you should have said so—”

“...No.”

Akari half-lidded eyes bored into Tohru's.

Actually, it was less “boring into” and more a merciless “drilling right through his head out to the other end.” It was a terrifying stare—one that would doubtlessly cause a child to run away screaming with tears down their face.

“Then, what is it?”

“An important person, huh. *Someone very dear...*”

” Akari bent forward suddenly, and as a reflexive response, Tohru shrank back. It was clear who was the dominant one here. Then, still glaring, Akari posed her next question solemnly, as if she were inquiring about something as deep as the meaning of life itself.

“Nii-sama, do you perhaps prefer flat chests?”

“What the hell are you saying!?”

Righting himself once more, Tohru screamed at Akari.

But his expressionless sister just went on as if unaffected.

“‘What am I saying,’ you ask, but isn't it obvious? I'm talking about my

brother's sexual preferences."

"And why the hell does something so pointless matter!?"

"Wrong." Akari declared definitively. Her expressions were always few and far between, but right now she seemed strangely gung-ho...or rather, the presence radiating from her was strong enough for Tohru to recoil on impulse. "It certainly does matter. It's absolutely vital information."

"I...I don't really have a preference when it comes to chest size, okay?"

"So even a stumpy-waisted, beanpole of a girl is enough to hit your strike zone?" Akari looked in Chaika's direction.

"...Like I said, I really don't get what you're talking about!"

"And I told you, I'm talking about your sexual preferences."

"I don't have any one all-encompassing, "sure-thing" fetish, all right?" Getting the feeling that they would get nowhere if he didn't give an earnest reply, he reluctantly answered. "I guess it's like...I kind of just respond to everything normally, in moderation...or something."

"Hm." Arms crossed, Akari tilted her head, and seemed to be mulling over his words for a bit.

Then...

"...I don't get it."

"I don't get *you*," Tohru said.

"Then I'll phrase it like this...what do you consider dear to you?"

"Like I said—" He began to retort, but then he stopped himself.

At long last, he had realized what Akari was getting at.

"Wait..."

"Of course I'll wait, Nii-sama. If it means bringing your true fetishes to light, I'll wait until the decay of the Earth."

"That's *too long* to wait!"

After throwing out that retort, Tohru scratched his cheek and continued.

“I mean, that’s not the point. By “*what’s* most dear to you, you meant *who*, surely.”

“Who’s Shirley? Another one of your floozies?”

“I didn’t mean Shirley, as in the name!” (1)

Well, when one mentions “someone dear,” the first thing most people would think of

would be a lover.

However, that was obviously not what Tohru meant.

Therefore—

“Well, I mean,” Tohru cleared his throat, then gave a perfunctory glance to Chaika who, as always, looked lost. “Chaika—she gave me a purpose. Me, someone who was sitting on my ass all day just rotting away, not putting my skills to any use. A true failure of a saboteur. And so, I feel like I owe her a debt of gratitude. That’s all.”

“Tohru...” Chaika muttered his name, dumbfounded. She must have not been aware of it herself. In fact, she looked completely astonished.

And then...

“Love confession?” she finally asked, tilting her head.

“Not you too! You two need to pay attention to when people are talking!” Tohru yelled.

Why was it that the girls around him always misinterpreted everything that was said?

Were all teenage girls like that, perhaps? Back in the Acura village there were young female saboteurs other than Akari, of course, but Akari had had such a strong impression on him that he could barely remember any of the other girls. She had always been by his side, after all.

“Anyway.” Letting out a breath, Tohru continued. “We’re up against a dragoon cavalier. Though we haven’t seen the dragon yet, we know Dominica

can use its power. Even if the dragon isn't with her, she herself has the qualities of one. We arranged a meeting beforehand, but however much that may raise our morale, she's still not an opponent we can win against in a fair fight, I think."

"..."

Chaika audibly gulped.

The conversation having made it this far, the girl now had no choice but to put on a serious face. After all, this was now a discussion that would determine the fate of the battle, and quite possibly their lives. Any dissent in their intentions or awareness at this point would result in a swift death. Even Chaika should have been able to understand that.

So, let's come up with a strategy."

They laid all the techniques at their disposal, as well as all their individual ideas and opinions, on the table.

And they came up with a plan that, if all went perfectly, would give them about a fifty-fifty chance of victory.

"...Tohru."

Chaika spoke, tilting her head suddenly.

"About that—misunderstand. Possible. Consider."

"Huh? Misunderstood?" Tohru raised his eyebrows at Chaika's unexpected comment. "You mean

/ misunderstood something?"

"Dragon, here—most likely."

Chaika looked all around the room.

"...What do you mean by that?"

"Dragoon magic, body, can alter. Transformation magic."

"Yeah, so I've heard."

A dragoon possessed magic that allowed it to alter its own body.

But Tohru and Akari had not witnessed that magic for real—or rather, the only time they’d seen it was when Dominica had used it upon entering the mansion. As for the dragon itself, they had seen them in drawings before, but never in real life.

Other types of dragons, mostly those belonging to the lizard species (altogether called mini-dragons), existed in many different varieties on the continent of Verbist.

But in the same way that orthrus were clearly different from regular dogs or wolves, it was the point of contention of magic that separated a dragoon from a mini-dragon. A dragoon could even be said to be the “final form” of a dragon.

Not to mention...they possessed intelligence rivaling that of a human, and could even manipulate their “armor” as a weapon. In that sense, there certainly was a fine line drawn between their kind and other dragons.

“If...” Chaika began, sticking up her index finger. “If size can change, is possible.”

“Size? You mean that a dragoon’s magic can probably not only change their appearance, but their size as well?”

“Yes. Could be large, could be small.”

Chaika gave a nod as if to say *you got it*.

“...I see, so that’s how it is, huh.” Tohru groaned.

To be honest, he hadn’t even thought about that.

Tohru had assumed somewhat subconsciously from names like “dragoon” and “dragoon cavalier” that it would at least be large enough to ride—perhaps even double the size of a horse. Not only that, veteran saboteurs that had actually witnessed the dragoon and its cavalier in person had even told him as much...

However, when you thought about it, there was no concrete evidence that a dragoon’s transformation was limited to a fixed size. If they so willed it, they could probably shrink to a size small enough to fit in the palm of a hand.

“Could *that*

be the reason behind the sparse information on dragoons and dragoon cavaliers...?”

To each nation’s military forces, the information they had about dragoons and dragoon cavaliers was considered a “secret weapon” of sorts, so there were many aspects that were highly classified. However, once guerilla warfare was deemed necessary and they tossed the dragoons into the fray, where they would “appear in unexpected places” in front of their comrades, it would have probably become evident that they could change their size.

For instance, the dragoon cavalier could hide their dragoon in a handbag or small container until it was time to fight, and then by using magic it could return to its original size while on the battlefield, or something. Such possibilities meant that the dragoon—or rather, the dragoon cavalier—was able to optimize both mobility and secrecy. A surprise attack from a bunch like that and no enemy would be able to cope.

“So the dragoon might be concealed somewhere in this mansion, you mean,” Tohru said.

In other words, they also had to fear a possible surprise attack from Dominica’s dragoon.

“One possibility. Other is...”

She made a circle with her index finger.

As if to indicate the entire area around them.

“Entire mansion, is dragoon.”

“...What?” said Tohru, puzzled at first, but then—

”I see.”

Having realized what she meant, he surveyed his surroundings once more, visibly creeped out.

Yes. She was right—it was possible.

If they could shrink, that meant they could most likely grow as well.

And to what degree could they transform their body? Would the base

skeleton be left, or could they alter that too?

Tohru's group didn't know the limits of a dragoon's magic.

From the name "dragoon (2)", they had gone ahead and assumed that it was a being at least capable of altering its skin, but if it was possible for them to change size, then perhaps they weren't even assuming a dragon-like form to begin with.

"Could it be that right now, we're in the dragoon's—"

Inside the dragoon's stomach.

Tohru, suddenly realizing that the comfy bed he had been so grateful to sleep on might have actually been a piece of the dragoon's entrails, grimaced.

And then—

"Mmph!"

In the next instant, Akari swung the sharp end of her hammer down at the floor.

Thud!

A dull sound resonated as the floorboards bent backwards.

"Wh...!?"

Unconsciously, Tohru unsheathed his blades and assumed a stance.

Chaika too was clearly surprised, having frozen in the middle of getting up, her rear still in the air.

"W...what the hell was that for, dumbass!?"

"If this mansion really is part of the dragoon, I wanted to see if it'd react if I damaged the floor or wall," Akari said matter-of-factly. "But it seems like that didn't happen."

"Man, that was sudden. My heart practically leapt out of my chest," Tohru said, staring at the dent Akari had made in the floor. There was no blood leaking from it or anything, so Tohru couldn't see it as anything but a simple wooden floor.

For the time being, he didn't see any gastric juices seeping out from anywhere, coming to digest.

"Your heart leapt out of your chest? You mean like *doki-doki*?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose."

"I see. That reminds me: way back in psychology class there was a "suspension bridge" phenomenon we talked about, wasn't there? If your heart continues to go

doki-doki

like that, it's possible that I may be able to manipulate your feelings, Nii-sama."

"You just told me about it, so I doubt it'll work." Tohru said.

As mentioned previously, saboteurs had to make use of incitement and schemes, and as a means to that end they were also drilled in human psychology—or rather, how to manipulate someone's feelings. The "suspension bridge" technique Akari mentioned was one such phenomenon. It posited that when a male and a female were in a precarious, unstable situation, like a suspension bridge, and their heartbeats increased due to sudden fear or excitement of said situation, they would mistake the cause of the heightened heartbeat for romantic or sexual feelings.

The effect wasn't very long-lasting, but if you were to create a situation where that

was sure

to happen, you could certainly "bind" your opponent for a bit. Basically, it was taught as a possible means of seduction that would serve well in trying to cajole a "man on the inside."

"I'd thought it was used only for instances in which you'd need to get information from the enemy, but this was quite the blind spot. They do say that 'to seduce your enemies, you must first seduce your allies'."

"They do not."

“From now on, Nii-sama, prepare yourself for surprise attacks in the morning and evening.”

“I’d die of a heart attack first!”

As he yelled, Tohru punched the wall, his fist meeting the wood. The feeling in his hand confirmed to him that it was just a regular wall covered with wallpaper after all.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

1. This was originally a play on words with *aya*, a word for “intent,” and Aya, a common Japanese female name. The joke doesn’t work in English so I changed it completely to one that does. The punchline of Akari mistaking the word for yet another possible girl in Tohru’s life remains intact.

2. Along with “armored,” one of the kanji in the word “dragoon” is “change.”

Part 2

Like always, she made her way out to the courtyard to go meet the ephemeral girl bathed in the moonlight.

Her quiet smile, tinged with a hint of shyness.

In the rain. In the wind. At noon. At night.

Time had already stopped for this girl. Five years ago on that day, her future had been put on permanent hold. All that was left of her was, literally, an afterimage.

But even so, the one she left behind still clung to the olden days.

Not wishing for those memories to fade—the woman dragged them along with her instead, kept all of the girl's portraits and articles, and replayed those memories in her head over and over again.

She didn't regret doing so.

This was a human thing to do.

This was what humans ought to do.

Therefore...

"Why?" Dominica asked not taking her eyes off the false Lucie Scoda. "Our battle is tomorrow at noon. Or were you thinking you could get me in my sleep?"

"I would if I thought that it would actually work," the young man—the saboteur Tohru—said. "Y'see, there are a lot of things that don't make sense here."

"...Don't make sense?"

At last, Dominica moved her gaze off the false image and onto the two standing behind her.

Next to Tohru was the silver-haired girl—Chaika, the one that resembled Lucie in appearance. Dominica didn't see Tohru's sister Akari anywhere, so perhaps

she was planning a surprise attack, or setting something up.

“You were part of the special forces that were said to have directly toppled Emperor Gaz and his empire, correct?”

“Correct, and?” She made a puzzled expression.

Why would he be asking something like that now?

“You don’t remember *her*, then?” Tohru indicated Chaika beside him.

“Remember? What do you mean?”

Dominica narrowed her eyes as she stared at Chaika.

And simultaneously, Tohru narrowed his eyes at Dominica.

His were the eyes of someone making allowance, searching for something.

“...I see.”

Tohru nodded, like he had understood something.

“Well? Anything else? Satisfied now?” Dominica asked.

“Yeah. More or less.”

He walked up to Dominica’s side.

His pair of shortswords hung on his waist, but he made no attempt to reach for them. There was no trace of intent to fight, or kill. It seemed that he really hadn’t come to attack her and break their agreement about tomorrow’s duel.

“Hey, you’re a dragoon cavalier, right?” Tohru asked as he looked around the area. “Is it really okay for you to fight without a dragoon?”

“Would you prefer I summon it? That would snuff out your one-in-a-million-chance of victory, you know?”

“You’ve got a point, but...”

Tohru walked right past Dominica and over to the Lucie hologram.

“—Hey.”

“What?”

By the time Dominica’s voice reached him, he was already side-by-side with

Lucie.

“Don’t get close to my sister. Don’t touch her.”

“This isn’t your sister. It’s just a fake,” Tohru said indifferently.

He wasn’t taking pity on her, nor was he scorning her. He just told it like it was.

A fake. An afterimage. Of course she knew that.

But—

“The dead will never die again. The dead will never hurt again. They just fade away into oblivion.”

“...”

“Just like this.”

Suddenly—Tohru threw something with his right hand.

“—!?”

There was a light whistling noise.

Like an arrow being loosed on the battlefield—

“You bastard!?”

In the next instant, there was a *thunk*, and her sister’s hologram vanished.

And then, there was nothing left. Truly—nothing.

“What did you do!?”

Dominica strode over to Tohru and grabbed his collar.

He had probably thrown something—and broken the projecting device.

“What’s the matter? You get unstable when your sister’s not by your side?”

Tohru returned Dominica’s glare, blazing with rage, with leveled eyes.

“Are your feelings toward your sister really so pathetic?”

“What did you say?”

“It’s not like you’re the only one who’s ever lost someone special, you know.

Even I have,” Tohru said, in a voice meant to throw down the gauntlet.

“...And so?”

Just as Tohru said, countless friends and family members had perished in the long war. So there was no need for him to communicate it to her again so haughtily.

“It’s been seared into me.”

“...What?”

“Even if I wanted to forget, there’s no way I could. About her. When I close my eyes, she’s there. Whether I want her to be or not. No matter how many times I reject it, or refuse it, my memories of her keep coming back. I can’t even think about anything else.”

“...My...” Dominica moaned.

“Wouldn’t you say, then, that your feelings towards your sister are kinda weak in comparison?”

“Perhaps.”

Tohru stared right at Dominica, his expression icy.

“You kept her portraits. You even saved her stuff. Anyone would do that. But having an afterimage of your sister smack dab in the middle of the courtyard where you can see her from any room in the mansion, even in rain and wind, during both noon and night, what the hell sort of purpose do you think that serves?”

“...”

Dominica had no words.

Because somewhere in her heart, she knew there was a part of Tohru’s words that she couldn’t refute.

She hadn’t even thought about it. It was just what a human would do—what humans ought to do, she had thought. And she had kept telling herself that. It was probably more out of duty than some actual desire.

“Hey you...you’re not actually that sad, are you?”

“What did you just say to me!?” She gripped Tohru’s collar even tighter. His toes were just barely touching the ground. But the saboteur did not back down. He narrowed his eyes, and spoke as if he was seeing through Dominica’s very core.

“Even though you lost your precious sister, you’re not that sad at all. You’re just forcing yourself, going along with the motions of sadness, aren’t you?”

“...Bastard...are you making a fool of me?”

Why would he be saying something like that?

Even if, say, it was true, what was his aim in intentionally pointing that out to her and riling her up? How did that benefit him? Surely he didn’t think she’d be overjoyed and grateful at having been told this?

“...Are you mad?” Tohru asked, as if probing around for something.

So making her angry had indeed been the goal? True, if he aimed to get her angry enough to lose herself he might be able to make an opening. And neither dragoons nor dragoon cavaliers were actually immortal. If an opening revealed itself and she were to suffer a killing blow, that would be the end of her.

“...”

Dominica—let out a sigh, and released Tohru’s collar.

“We’ve got things to do early tomorrow. I will have calmed down after a night’s sleep.”

“Is that so?” Tohru nodded, fixing his collar.

He didn’t seem particularly bitter about it. So the goal *wasn’t* to make her mad, then?

Or perhaps—

“...Projection device.”

A voice cut in between Tohru and Dominica without warning.

When Dominica turned her head to face the voice, the vestiges of anger probably still remained in her eyes. As a result, Chaika flinched for a second, but then continued on as though she had found her resolve.

“Will fix. Apologize.”

The silver-haired girl seemed to be genuinely sorry.

Or perhaps even though they were together, Chaika had not been informed of what Tohru was planning beforehand. Maybe all of Tohru’s actions tonight had been on a whim, purely circumstantial.

“Device repair, quite skilled.”

“.....All right.”

After Dominica thought it over a bit, she nodded.

“Suit yourself. But don’t think for a second that you can get me to hand over the remains in exchange for the repair.”

Both the projection device and Lucie’s hologram were precious, but it wasn’t like they were irreplaceable.

“Of course. Repair. Tomorrow. Before noon—before battle, will give back.”

Chaika nodded her head enthusiastically. She took that to mean that she had no intention of playing dirty and using Lucie’s hologram as a bargaining chip.

“You said you wanted a fight, and we’re gonna give it to you,” said Tohru next to her, straightening his posture.

But her opponents were saboteurs. How much of those words she could trust, she didn’t know.

“If so, I’d like that.”

“With that parting remark, Dominica turned on her heel.

Lucie’s hologram was gone, so Dominica had no further business here.

Although, to Dominica as she was now, it made no difference whether she was in a room or by the roadside. Any space where she could continue existing was fine with her. She had lost her real home, so it wasn’t an exaggeration to say the concept of “place” was a mere trifle.

But—

“ ... ”

Tohru's words just now resounded in her mind.

Hey you...you're not actually that sad, are you?

"Preposterous," Dominica told herself. "I'm devastated. I'm filled with regret. But—"

Tohru had been wrong.

But had he been *completely* wrong...?

"It's just...preposterous."

Dominica exited the courtyard, muttering to herself.

*

After leaving the courtyard, Tohru's next destination was the Svetrana.

Though Akari had already fully investigated the rooms they had been given, Tohru had determined that the final preparations had to be taken care of outside the mansion, just in case.

"Tohru." As they exited the foyer, Chaika, following half a step behind him, spoke up. "Why...?"

The projection device she had retrieved from the premises was small enough for her to cradle in her arms. One of Tohru's throwing daggers was sticking out from the side of it. A small rock probably could have done the job just fine, except breaking it hadn't been the end goal. In order for it to be easy to repair afterwards he was aiming for pinpoint accuracy, so he had chosen to use a weapon he was familiar with.

However, Tohru had not informed Chaika of the particulars beforehand.

Sure, that might have been a bad thing to do, but Chaika was a girl that let all her emotions show on her face right away, so informing her would have most likely been a hindrance.

"Huh? What do you mean 'why..?'"

"Something, cruel, like that."

"...Ah."

Tohru scrunched up his face.

It seemed like Chaika had a bone to pick with him about his acrimonious treatment of Dominica, including how he ruined her projection device. Sure, from a spectator's perspective it probably looked like he was just being evil.

"I wanted to confirm something. I wanted to see if Dominica would actually get angry when I said that stuff," Tohru explained, recalling Dominica's face.

She had indeed been angry. She'd been angry, but—

"Hey, Chaika."

Tohru, now beside the Svetrana, turned to look at her.

He could feel himself hesitating for a second, but he went on and asked anyway.

"What if I had said those things to you about your father? How would you feel about it?"

"Father? About? Eh?"

Chaika just stood there, clearly confused.

It seemed she didn't understand Tohru's question at all.

"Like for instance, what if I told you, 'you're not really that sad about your father's death at all, are you?'"

"...Mu?"

Chaika's brows formed a crease.

Right. That's how it is, Tohru muttered in his heart.

Sadness only diffuses inside people. It's not something you can just forget. But the mind learns to bear it and move onward. Whether or not you are sad—is normally pushed back to the subconscious.

It was the same for pain.

If left alone, the pain from a wound that has yet to heal doesn't last forever. In most cases, the pain is most severe the instant the wound is received. Assuming the wound doesn't reopen, the pain only dulls from then on and you

become accustomed to it—the wound hasn't healed and the pain hasn't vanished, but you're not as aware of it. .

And that's why if someone were to say to Tohru that he wasn't really that torn up over Jasmine's death, he wouldn't get angry. He might be confused, but just by looking inside himself and finding that sadness remaining in his heart he could easily deny their words.

For someone to get angry after having that said to you—wouldn't that be the same as confirming that they were right?

He got the feeling that the more you insist on being sad, the more you end up actually negating your own efforts.

If so—

"Crying and wailing, done. No more. But—truly sad."

"I'm sure," Tohru nodded.

"But you wouldn't be mad."

"Mm." Chaika nodded. "But. Father, death. Didn't see."

"Same as Dominica, then."

Yes, there were those out there who had experienced the death of a loved one without being able to witness it themselves. However, would they actually get angry at having it pointed out to them?

However he looked at it, Dominica's words and behavior were strange.

And what's more—

Her having a piece of the remains confirms that she was one of those who directly finished off the Taboo Emperor.

The count at Del Solant had also belonged to that group.

"R-ridiculous! You're supposed to be dead!"

Roberto Abarth had definitely said that.

Though he had no way to confirm it, he was sure that those words weren't directed at him or Akari. And the only people present in the room at the time

had been Tohru, Akari, Roberto...and Chaika.

Therefore, the person who was “supposed to be dead” according to Roberto had to be Chaika.

To be honest, before he’d met Chaika—no, even up until he’d heard about her background from Gillette Corps, Tohru had no idea that Emperor Gaz even had a daughter.

He didn’t know much about Emperor Gaz in the first place...or rather, it was said that no one save for a small fraction of his close aides knew anything about his personal life.

But the world’s leaders, emperors, kings, and sovereigns alike, were men of the public. If one of them had a family, it would be known throughout all the land. Even if you did try to hide it, you couldn’t do so half-heartedly.

And yet...never mind the existence of a daughter, there was absolutely no information on any possible wives he may have had, legal or otherwise. Most likely, even his subjects had had no idea.

Which meant...

Only so many people have seen Chaika’s face.

This held even truer for those outside the Empire.

And...those words, “you’re supposed to be dead...”

From that logic, couldn’t that mean that Roberto Abarth saw Chaika’s face during the attack on the Empire’s capital?

Like when he’d broken into Emperor Gaz’s living quarters, for instance.

With the castle under siege, it certainly made sense that Emperor Gaz would have wanted his closest retainers and family with him while formulating an escape plan. In that sense, it was possible that Chaika had been by Arthur Gaz’s side during the battle. In that case, it wasn’t strange at all for Roberto Abarth to have seen Chaika’s face while the special forces unit was apprehending the emperor.

If you thought about Chaika’s memory loss as the result of some sort of shock or trauma from witnessing that scene, then everything fit.

But...if that was true...

Dominica should be one of those same heroes, so she should have seen Chaika's face as well.

Yet she didn't recognize her. Chaika being as unique and beautiful as she was, there was no way Dominica couldn't have recognized her as soon as she saw her.

What on earth did that mean, then?

Perhaps the special forces unit didn't always operate as a whole?

Of course, depending on the details, it was more than possible that Dominica had just never seen Chaika's face, but—

It was also possible that Dominica wasn't there when Emperor Gaz had fallen.

In other words...

"Quite the conundrum," Tohru said as he lowered a wicker basket off of the Svetrana's luggage rack. In it were a number of tools and assorted pieces of equipment that they had taken from the Acura village at the time of their departure. The raid on Abarth's mansion had primarily been a stealth mission, so in that case they had prioritized agility and not used the tools. However, they were facing a dragoon cavalier head-on. This mission would have a heavy emphasis on combat.

"Ugh, I just feel like something's off."

"Off?"

"I provoked her just so I could figure out what, but..."

"...?"

Chaika's head tilt showed him that naturally, she didn't get it at all.

"I'll explain later," Tohru said as he looked over the contents of the basket.

Chaika stood there by his side, staring at him intently, but then—

"Tohru."

She spoke, her expression slightly troubled for some reason.

“What?”

“In case...life in danger...recommend...running away.”

“...”

Tohru put the lid back on the basket and focused his attention on her.

When he glanced at her face from the front, she averted her gaze and tried to turn her head, like she was embarrassed by something. But Tohru reached out both hands, placed them on the left and right sides of her face, and stopped that action.

“Mui!?”

“Now listen here,” Tohru said, clearly and emphatically. *“I don’t need that kind of concern.”*

“...Tohru?”

Chaika’s eyes went wide.

Staring into her violet eyes, into their depths, Tohru continued.

“I’m a saboteur. Whether it’s our own or other people’s, making light of life is our trade.”

Mind, body, techniques, even life itself, were mere tools to accomplish the mission.

That was a saboteur’s creed...and their pride.

“...However.”

Chaika looked like she was on the verge of tears.

It really seemed like Chaika hadn’t given any thought to how her mission, the gathering of the remains, would affect others around her, or if she had, she hadn’t fully realized the implications.

Being despised. Being hated. And...losing something as a result.

Like the life of a comrade, for instance.

But the girl wasn’t trying to collect just any old remains. These were the remains of the Taboo Emperor. Even after death, his influence was much too

large—an existence that affected a great number of people’s fates. Of course they would have to risk their lives to retrieve remains of that caliber.

Even Chaika was probably prepared to put her own life on the line.

But using the lives of others as collateral to fulfill one’s own selfish ambitions required a different type of resolve.

However, asking Chaika to harbor this resolve when her ultimate goal was merely to give her father a proper burial was admittedly harsh.

Because to her, it would be the same as telling her allies to die for her own ambitions.

“Please.” Tohru’s face relaxed, and he showed her a wry smile. “Think of your own desires before anything else.”

“Tohru?”

“At the very least, don’t toss away your own goal out of consideration for either of us. Otherwise, all our effort will be for nothing, *Master*.”

“...”

Chaika blinked her eyes rapidly again and again, almost like she was scared, in fact.

Now, after all this time, she probably finally realized what it meant to employ a saboteur.

“I said it before, didn’t I? My objective is making sure you see your objective through to the end. So when my master is on the fence and unsure, it makes my job difficult.”

“Tohru...I...”

Chaika was at a loss for words, like she couldn’t choke them out.

And then—

“...Shit!”

In the next instant, Tohru pushed Chaika away and reflexively leapt backwards.

A black *something* shot past right between them.

It struck the exterior of the Svetrana and spun through the air, having glanced off.

“...Wait a minute...”

Tohru stretched out his hand and grabbed it.

It was a throwing dagger, specifically painted black so as to prevent light reflecting off of it. It might have looked different, but it was a staple item of which multiple would be found in any saboteur’s bag.

In other words...

“Akari!”

Tohru turned around to see his sister walking towards him from Dominica’s mansion with a glare.

“Hey, what’s the big idea!?”

“Nii-sama,” Akari said with half-lidded eyes. “That was a dangerous situation.”

“You’re

the one that’s dangerous!” Tohru said, lightly tossing the dagger back to her. “Throwing that out of the blue—”

“Trying to steal a kiss under the cover of the night...but really, that’s just like you, Nii-sama.

“What do you mean!?”

Though, he did more or less realize what Akari was getting at.

Earlier when Tohru grabbed Chaika’s face to prevent her from averting her eyes towards him, it must have looked like he was trying to forcibly take her lips for his own. To put it bluntly, her deduction skills were the absolute worst...but well, telling her so was pointless.

“I mean, you tried to kiss her.”

“Did not! Besides, you threw a dagger at me for a tiny little thing like that!?”

“I did. I did indeed.”

“Don’t sound so proud of it!”

“Anyway, it’s much too soon for you to be having children.”

“...Eh?”

Tohru scrunched up his face, completely lost.

“...What do you mean by that?”

“Nii-sama, do you not know?”

Akari stated her next words in a meaningful tone, like she was imparting some grand wisdom upon him.

“Kissing is how babies are made.”

“...Your knowledge is twisted in all sorts of ways.”

Feeling a pointless exhaustion bearing down on him, he lowered his shoulders.

He breathed a heavy sigh—and switching gears, posed a question.

“So...how’d it go?”

“Pretty much exactly as you thought. I checked the whole mansion, but”—she returned the throwing dagger to her bag—even the supposed room that Dominica stays in showed almost no signs of use.”

Basically, that was what Akari had been up to in the meantime. While Tohru and Akari were in the courtyard occupying Dominica’s attention, Akari was combing the mansion thoroughly, even the rooms that they hadn’t previously been able to check like Dominica’s own room. If she was to come across the remains during the search, it was simple—they would just take them and run, though honestly Tohru hadn’t expected as much.

“Ever since we made dinner, it’s been bugging me.”

The kitchen that was left largely untouched.

No matter how attuned to the battlefield you were, there was no point to going out of your way to cook outdoors when you had a perfectly good kitchen. The stove was so neglected it had become a spider’s’ nest. At least, it was clear that a fire hadn’t been lit even once in the kitchen in the past year, or maybe

longer.

“Even the bed was untouched. The floor was coated in dust.”

In other words, the exact same as the room Tohru and Akari had been given.

“In actuality, Dominica Scoda’s room did show some slight signs of use. However, it certainly wasn’t recent. That room hasn’t been used in over a year.”

“Dammit. In this case I would’ve preferred to have my expectations betrayed...” He sighed.

“...?”

Chaika next to him looked back and forth between Tohru and Akari with a puzzled expression.

She likely didn’t understand the meaning of their conversation, and how it related to the conclusion that Tohru had ultimately reached.

“So what’s the plan, Nii-sama?”

Akari took down a basket from the luggage rack with her own tools crammed in it. Her basket was different from Tohru’s in that aside from her weapons and armor, it also had chemistry equipment and assorted drugs ranging from salves and internally-taken medication to poisons and incendiaries. The sound of the items coming into contact with a porcelain vase resounded through the room, as a container was needed to keep them all in one place.

“In a fair fight against our opponent, I don’t think we could win.”

“And that’s why this won’t be a fair fight, of course.”

Tohru shrugged.

“All right, once we’re in the vehicle I’ll tell you the plan I’ve cooked up. Then I want you to tell me what you both think.”

Part 3

For Dominica, there was no such thing as “naptime.”

A dragoon’s magic was the ability to alter the body. In other words, she was able to consciously control every aspect of her own body. Naturally, that included being able to manipulate required sleep time and depth of sleep. If she wanted to, she could make it so only sleeping one hour out of every day could wipe away her exhaustion. She could also sleep standing up, like cows and horses do.

Thanks to that, she didn’t dream. But that was okay.

“...It’s about time.”

From her closed window, she watched the morning light sink downwards.

Though she didn’t own a watch, she could guess the time accurately.

“All right, Dominica. Time for battle.”

With just the slightest bit of excitement, Dominica encouraged herself, then said a magic chant. A blue light surrounded her, and her regular cloth outfit dispersed, her armor now in its place.

Of course, in actuality her armor and clothing were just her bare skin in a transformed state. Though she had no semblance of human shame, wearing clothes had become a habit for her.

The saboteur boy had been surprised at the fact that she hadn’t used chants, but actually, she *did* use them. However, she had spoken them just by activating the vocal cords deep in her throat, so if she kept her mouth closed no one would be able to hear. This was also possible due to the dragoon magic that allowed her to freely control her own body.

“...Hmm?”

When she opened the door to leave the room, the door hit upon something.

Pushing on the door slightly and slowly this time, she walked out into the hallway and saw the projection device she’d used to display Lucie’s hologram

lying there on the ground.

It seemed like that girl Chaika had kept her promise.

She was about to check to see if it still functioned—but then she shook her head.

If all went well, she wouldn't even need it anymore. So there was no need to check on it.

Dominica pushed the projection device into the bedroom, walked out and shut the door.

"...Really, how confounding," she muttered, and headed for the courtyard.

There, those three were supposed to be waiting.

The courtyard had been set as the meeting spot, but she had left the spot of the start of the battle itself up to their discretion.

It was all the same anyway.

In a world without *her*, everywhere really was the same. Everything was dyed the same color, everything was flat, everything appeared to her as contrived and futile.

That was why...

"Did I keep you waiting?" Dominica asked as she stepped into the courtyard.

"Nah, we just got here," Tohru said, heavily armored.

However, only his knees, elbows, and shoulders were noticeably covered.

The torso, a crucial area, was left completely open, particularly the abdomen, though that was probably to prioritize ease of movement. A slip-guard would have been efficient enough to protect his organs, but because the center of the body was particularly solid, his movement definitely would have been hindered.

On the back of his waist were those dual short swords he seemed to favor. Two daggers in their scabbards, one for each arm, started at his wrists and came up to his elbows. Additionally, the vest on his chest had a number of throwing daggers strapped to it, probably doubling as more armor. No doubt, he was also wearing thin chainmail underneath it all.

In comparison, next to him Akari's armor setup was considerably lighter.

She had a hammer in her hand, and it seemed like she had things hidden on her person here and there, but nothing as conspicuous as Tohru's. She was most likely prioritizing ease of movement to the absolute maximum.

And then—

"I see. A wizard, huh?" Dominica nodded as she looked at Chaika's enormous Gundo she was carrying.

I see...that certainly makes sense.

With the support of a specialist in long-range attacks and support attacks like a wizard, a saboteur excelling in close-combat attacks would be able to stand on the same ground as their enemy. A saboteur could also probably stall for time, allowing the wizard to cast their heavily time-dependent spells. As for Tohru prioritizing defense and offense and Akari prioritizing evasion, that difference was most likely so they would have all their bases covered no matter what fighting style Dominica decided to use.

For people calling themselves saboteurs, they were actually playing by the books. She was surprised.

To someone with years of experience on the battlefield like Dominica, it was even laughable.

But, she didn't dislike it.

Perhaps they had actually taken Dominica's offhand comment of "I want to stand on the battlefield once more" to heart, and had chosen to fight honestly for her sake.

But, this was no time to be appreciative.

If she was grateful here, it wouldn't be a battlefield.

Her wish was to stand on the battlefield, so—

"Ready?"

"Anytime," Tohru replied, but as if an afterthought had just come to mind, suddenly continued. "Oh, by the way, we're really strong, so you might actually

die.”

“Hmph.”

Dominica felt her lips curve upward.

Apparently, he had every intention of winning.

Good. Very good. If he didn’t, it wouldn’t be a battle. Dominica Scoda did not wish for a one-sided battle against an unmotivated opponent.

“Oh, and we couldn’t figure out where the remains were either, so that was quite the puzzle.”

“No need to worry about that,” Dominica said. “They’re inside the projection device.”

“...”

As she expected, Tohru’s group looked at each other, most likely in utter surprise.

To be honest, if Chaika had happened to spot them during her repairs, Dominica had thought it’d be okay to go ahead and let her have them.

It wasn’t like Dominica hated Chaika—or Tohru and Akari, for that matter. So there had been a point where she’d actually hesitated to have this battle for their lives all for the sake of her own selfishness. If they spotted the remains, grabbed them and took off running, Dominica understood that that was lucky for them in its own way.

“Guess it’s too late to take all this back now, huh?” he asked with a wry smile.

“There’s nothing to take back,” Dominica said, and raised her greatsword.

The sword was big enough to rival Dominica herself. This, too, was in actuality a piece of her armor—in other words, a piece of herself. If the blade dulled or broke, she could return it to its original form with magic. If it got knocked out of her hand, she could just create a new one that was exactly the same. To dragoon cavaliers, there was no such thing as “disarmament.”

“All right—let’s begin our fair fight.”

“Yeah, right. I’m a saboteur.”

So he said, but he unsheathed his dual shortswords and held them at the ready.

“Besides, this is a battlefield. Fair doesn’t mean shit here. All that matters is winning.”

“...I see, you’re exactly right.”

Dominica laughed, and took a step forward.

“Well then, here I go.”

A dragoon cavalier’s greatest weapon, aside from the defensive properties they received from their dragon, was their *unpredictability*.

In that sense, their strength shared something in common with the strength of saboteurs.

In other words—

“—!”

It was literally instantaneous.

The distance between them, about ten steps or so, was obliterated in the blink of an eye. Dominica, who at the start of the blink was a good distance away, had already appeared right in front of Tohru’s face and had raised her sword by the time the blink finished.

Absolutely insane stride.

She’d looked weighed down with her bulky armor and huge sword, but...it was unbelievable. She was even faster than Tohru or Akari’s speed when they were only wearing light armor. By being deceived by her appearance for a split second, he was now going to experience the feeling of a blade slicing through his skull.

“Tch...!”

Tohru leapt to his right—what would be Dominica’s left.

A greatsword’s destructive power was proportional to its weight. However, that meant its adaptability was poor. A blade of that size’s trajectory couldn’t

be corrected in the middle of a downward swing, especially if the hand used was not the dominant one. In that case, the moment their own body intervened, a small opening would be created, dulling their movement—

“Naive!”

—or so it should have been.

Tohru never would have imagined that the blade would change directory mid-swing, heading towards him.

Nor did he expect for her to switch the hand supporting the blade from the left to the right.

It wasn't a technique, or anything like it. She had just forced the trajectory to change with brute strength—a truly superhuman feat.

“—!?”

Two throwing daggers strapped to Tohru's chest were destroyed in one go, their pieces flying. If they hadn't been there, his chest would have been sliced right through horizontally, and he would have been finished just from the opening attack.

That speed, despite all that bulky armor and weaponry. And the sheer force of that attack, despite how fast it was.

It was common sense that when you raise your defense, you lose speed. And when you raise your speed, you lose attack power. But in the case of Dominica, none of that applied.

That armor she was wearing was most likely not only for defensive purposes. It probably behaved like a living creature of its own, or rather, possessed functions similar to muscles that allowed her to increase things like stride and attack power.

“You did well to avoid my ‘Mortal Stroke.’”

Dominica actually looked impressed as she gave a satisfied laugh, and then assumed her stance.

It was the most basic of fundamental stances—almost as if she were an amateur just learning the way of the sword.

However, her explosive speed and tremendous strength sealed up any possible openings. Within the “fundamental stance” lurked many possibilities; it was called such because it was the basis for a wide variety of techniques.

“‘Mortal Stroke’, huh...I see, in most cases an attack like that would definitely slay the enemy in one go,” Tohru groaned.

In the unluckiest cases, there were probably even those who had died without even realizing they had been killed.

That was just how swift and powerful Dominica’s attack was.

Obliterated in an instant, not to mention with one single blow.

“It’s like you’re made up of surprise attacks...”

“Surely you won’t call foul?”

“Of course not,” Tohru replied with a bold laugh...then he leapt to the side.

Because Dominica had once again closed the distance between them in an instant, swinging her sword down.

There was no time for banter between them.

Ka-thunk! There was a noise that sounded more like a large, blunt object—like a battering ram—had struck the ground rather than a sword. The sheer force of the impact created a long, deep fissure in the courtyard earth.

Countless debris flew through the air, obstructing each other’s path—

“—Ngh!”

Dominica let out a groan.

At the same time, a high-pitched metallic clank resounded amidst the cloud of dust.

It was the sound of a throwing dagger glancing off something and twirling through the air. Dominica had used her sword to block the dagger, which had been thrown in tandem with the dust cloud.

“Truly a saboteur! You do not hesitate, nor do you leave yourself open.”

“Right back at you.”

The cloud of dust cleared.

Dominica's torso become visible—and a deeply embedded throwing dagger was protruding from a crack in her armor.

A number of throwing daggers were also lying at her feet. Since it had been impossible to precisely aim for his target amidst the dust, he recognized it was largely futile—but even so, he figured it'd be worth it if he could get even one of them to hit. However, it seemed like the dagger had unexpectedly hit a sweet spot.

"But, that won't be enough," Dominica said as she walked towards Tohru.

She didn't seem any more lenient—but, suddenly the throwing dagger fell from the crack in her armor, almost like it had been pushed out, and clattered to the ground next to her feet.

There was no trace of pain or discomfort on her face, and no change in her gait. There wasn't even any blood leaking out from the crack in her armor. If a normal human had had their abdomen pierced and didn't suffer an instant death, they would at least have been rendered immobile...

"...I get it," Tohru muttered, narrowing his eyes.

His gaze was fixed on Dominica's abdomen, specifically the place where there should have been an open wound. It was just for an instant, but he had seen a blue light leaking from the area. Magic. Using her magic, she had transformed her "wounded" abdomen into an "unwounded" one.

"Now, if you had struck my head instead..." Dominica said, almost as though she found it unfortunate from the bottom of her heart.

"If I'd pierced your forehead, you would have died?"

"From just piercing it, doubtful. Swords and the like are too sharp. A precise strike to the brain would be enough to be able to heal."

"I see, so that's how it is," said Tohru.

In the next instant—

"—Hmph."

Dominica rested her sword on her shoulder, as if carrying it.

This seemed like an incredibly flippant action, but at that moment, a hammer tracing a perfect arc in the air towards back of Dominica's head bounced off with a sharp noise like it had collided into something. Without even turning around, Dominica had intercepted the back attack.

“...”

Using the reversed momentum of the intercepted hammer, Akari spun around the opposite way and swung again, this time from the left, towards Dominica's neck.

In response, Dominica—

“Hnn!”

Performed a backstep.

Or no—that wasn't it.

Akari was trying to attack her from behind, so with Dominica's back still facing Akari, Dominica had rammed right into her.

Dominica had already previously demonstrated her abnormal leg strength. Naturally, her ramming attack was also ridiculously powerful.

Akari, who only had light armor covering her already-light body, was blown away, crashing into one of the mansion's windows.

“Guaah!?”

Smashing the glass and window frame, Akari tumbled into the mansion.

“Akari!” Chaika shouted.

The girl ran towards Akari's location, readying her Gundo that was about the same height as her.

“Idiot! Don't—”

Just use magic indiscriminately, is what he was going to say. However, those words never came out, due to a downward swing with intense force coming toward him.

“Tch—”

Immediately, Tohru threw several throwing daggers in quick succession, as if delivering a horizontal slice with a sword directly after unsheathing it. Normally this would cause the opponent to stop moving—they would need to solidify their footing in order to withstand the onslaught of deadly weapons heading towards them. That was what was supposed to happen, but...

“No way!?”

Tohru jumped backwards.

Dominica didn't stop. Not even for a second.

Unlike his earlier daggers, every single one of the small blades found their mark this time, and true to their aim, headed right for the crack in Dominica's armor as though they were being sucked in.

Yet Dominica remained unconcerned, and let the daggers pierce her.

There was no wavering in her cadence.

The situation as it was, there was no battle strategy he could adhere to. There was no point to baiting an opponent who didn't care to get hurt.

“Boy, just who do you think you're fighting?”

Dominica chased after the retreating Tohru with a ferocious laugh.

“Do you intend to make light of a dragoon's defenses? Did you perhaps think that they were cute creatures who would just curl up in a ball while their enemies passed by?”

She possessed equal parts defense and offense, with most of her attributes focused on breaking through a single point.

In other words, she was lethal.

“Humans are quite inconvenient.” Dominica said as she swung her sword around.

In some respects, she was like a bull in a china shop: literally swinging her sword haphazardly and forcefully, without rhyme, reason, or technique. However, her unparalleled strength made every strike lethal. Tohru could only

continue to dodge. If he was to carelessly block using a weapon here, not only would he lose the weapon, but most likely the use of his arm.

“You pierce their stomach, and they die. You slice their chest, and they die. You remove their head, and they die. They can even die from a mere blow to the head. Such fragile beings...and yet they’re so quick to throw themselves into battle.”

Dominica raised her sword high.

!

Before he knew it, Tohru realized he’d been cornered.

To his left was a stone. To his right was a flowerbed.

Thanks to these obstacles, if he leapt in either direction it would delay his leap by a second.

Then—

“Hup!”

Tohru leapt backwards.

From his encounters with it up till now, Tohru knew the span of Dominica’s weapon.

Realizing he would just make it by the skin of his teeth, he jumped.

“!?”

Crunch.

He had raised his left arm reflexively when he jumped, and a shock was now running up that arm.

Followed by an overflowing heat, and then finally—pain.

It was broken.

He didn’t even need to look at it to confirm. Dominica’s sword had shattered it, along with the dagger he’d attached to his arm.

If he hadn’t had that dagger there, and hadn’t been wearing his chainmail underneath—if that sword hadn’t been intercepted by the dagger and

chainmail, Tohru's arm would have probably went flying. There was no way he could have taken the attack.

"Ri...diculous..."

He had judged the distance, and confirmed he would dodge the attack. He'd taken Dominica's speed into consideration, and determined that there was no way the attack would reach...

"—Hey, wait!?" Momentarily forgetting the pain in his arm, Tohru yelled, dumbstruck. "That's..."

"I told you, didn't I?"

Dominica looked almost shocked at his reaction.

"Just who do you think you're fighting, boy?"

The sword in Dominica's hand was clearly much longer than before.

While it wasn't double the length, a few inches had been added onto it. This was how the blade was able to reach him and betray his calculations.

"This sword is also a product of dragoon magic. Therefore, it too can be 'transformed.' What need is there for a sword to always have fixed length, anyway?"

"Hey, wait...that's..."

"Surely you aren't going to say 'unfair?'"

"...I take it back, then," Tohru muttered as he jumped back for now. The impact of the landing caused pain to run up his arm.

"Guh..."

Not good. The pain was clouding his concentration.

Not to mention—in a wide area like this, he would absolutely fall prey to a sword that could shrink and extend as its user liked.

Tohru turned tail and raced into the mansion.

"Goddammit...to think she was such a bullshit opponent."

Grumbling to himself, Tohru ran down the hallway.

Dominica was probably chasing him.

“Fine, then. Come and get me, dragoon cavalier,” he muttered as he ran through the mansion.

Part 4

“I see. It’s an indoor battle he wants,” Dominica muttered as she stepped into her own mansion.

In a fixed space like this, her greatsword was only half as effective. Meanwhile, Tohru’s main weapon was a shortsword, so it was easier to swing around. Locational advantage—another common tactic in straightforward battle.

He was fighting more like a soldier than a saboteur, which only served to deepen her impression of him, but—

“But he didn’t think this through,” she muttered. Her sword disappeared, and immediately afterwards, curved blades like claws sprouted out one at time from both of her wrists. As she’d said earlier, the sword was merely a part of her armor and by extension a part of her own body, meaning it was within the area of effect for dragoon magic. If a greatsword was unsuited for this environment, she would simply select a better weapon.

Outside, she had already overwhelmed Tohru and Akari. Fleeing in here wasn’t going to change their situation.

Then...

“What about that girl Chaika?”

Dominica knew the reason wizards couldn’t be on the front lines.

With magic, you could set traps.

When equipping a Gundo, you had to adhere to various conditions, which could include anything from the temperature and humidity of the area to the actions of your allies and positioning of the stars. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be able to aim accurately. So while they were powerful and had a variety of uses, they took time to prepare.

However, what if the target was indoors, where they had limited movement?

And what if the wizard had known ahead of time what adjustments she

needed to make?

Then she could use magic much quicker.

Spending one night here was more than enough time to analyze the Scoda mansion and acquire the information she needed. Which meant...Chaika could use comparatively faster magic.

Dominica searched around, and then...

"...Ah-ha."

At the end of the long, narrow hallway—stood Chaika.

Her Gundo was at the ready, and was directly facing Dominica.

Dominica didn't know what kind of magical attack she'd prepared, but—

"Ha!"

With a single exhale, she kicked off the ground, heading right for the girl. She could close the distance between them in mere moments with her leg strength.

"Come, 'The Intruder!'"

Chaika spoke a chant.

And directly afterwards—something was released from the Gundo.

A blue light erupted from it with a shimmering noise and flew towards Dominica. She dodged it in an instant. By the time the light had collided with the wall behind her and dispersed, Dominica was already well within striking range of Chaika.

"Indeed, I cannot move as well in a long hallway," Dominica said as she looked down at Chaika. "But that also means that your timing and aim are easy to predict. Once one becomes aware of such things, dodging magic is like dodging a pebble—no, it's even easier."

"Uu..." Chaika took a step backwards, clutching her Gundo and sweat forming on her brow.

Dominica took a step forward.

Then Chaika took another step backwards.

And then—

“It’s a shame, but—”

This was war.

What Dominica desired was not to foster half-baked bonds. This was how it should be. This was what it meant to be driven to death’s door by madness.

Dominica raised her right claw—her shortswords.

In a panic, Chaika tried to back up even further...but there was a wall in her way.

“Uya!?”

“...?”

The moment that Dominica brought down her shortswords...Chaika vanished.

It seemed there had been a hole in the wall from the start. Chaika had tumbled through the hole and escaped outside. Dominica hadn’t seen the hole because, a cloth made to imitate the wallpaper had apparently been stuck over it.

“...So that’s how it is.”

She couldn’t call it underhanded. This was a wizard who, against a warrior, could only wait for her own death, after all. Of course they would have prepared some method for her escape.

“Hmm...?”

Suddenly noticing something, Dominica took hold of the cloth.

It was heavy. And wet.

It was covered in oil—or some other strangely viscous liquid.

What was the meaning of this? Had they intended to burn down the mansion with me in it?

However, that an attack like that would have no effect on a dragoon. They could just smash a hole in the wall to escape, and plus, they could practically parade through a fire of only that degree.

She let go of the sopping wet cloth and it sagged down, sticking to the wall. Perhaps the purpose of the oil was to remove the wrinkles and folds, making it look less conspicuous.

“It matters not.”

Dominica walked on, cautious.

After noticing a presence in the innermost guest room that matched Tohru’s, she ascended the stairs to the second floor.

And then—

*

The door opened, and Dominica walked into the room.

Tohru just stood there quietly, watching her.

“So, you thought you’d be victorious if you moved indoors?”

“...”

Silent, Tohru stepped forward.

His left arm had already been rendered useless, and anyone watching could tell fighting with just his right arm was hopeless. Not to mention his opponent Dominica could heal any small wounds she suffered almost instantly.

“I thought you’d entertain me more than this,” Dominica said.

Her expression was not that of an animal cruelly toying with its prey. It was earnest—far too sincere, as though she had truly desired it from the bottom of her heart.

“Weren’t you going to show me excitement like on the battlefield? You were going to grant me reckless abandon, wild enthusiasm without a care for anything else—”

“Don’t you dare look down on me!” Tohru said, readying his comblade. He sent a slash towards her. Dominica quickly deflected the slash with her right hand. The recoil from the intercepted attack sent Tohru reeling, and the blade went flying, lodging itself in the wall.

Dominica walked toward the disarmed Tohru.

Her weapon—the claw-like blades—came down over him and were about to cleave him in two, but—

“I knew it.”

Tohru dodged it with ease—and took a step forward.

“You really...”

Tohru came closer, past her striking range, a close enough distance to where he could feel the body heat radiating off her—and grinned.

“You really don’t know any skills or techniques, do you?”

“...!?”

Dominica suddenly stepped backward, but Tohru came even closer, allowing no distance between them. Almost glued together at this point, he pushed the tip of his sword against Dominica’s armor.

“You’re just covering up for it with your ridiculous speed and strength. You don’t have any skill. So when you thrust the same attack at me over and over again—I learn.”

“Boy, you—”

“Now *this*...”

Tohru grinned.

“...is what you call a technique!”

Bam! The floor resounded under his foot.

The sound was from Tohru’s stomp forward. Simultaneously, the entire workings of Tohru’s body, his muscles riding the high from the recoil of the stomp, sped up faster, faster, faster—until at last, in less than an instant, in less than the blink of an eye, all that pent-up energy exploded into the tip of the shortsword he was gripping.

“!?”

With a sound like something solid had been smashed to pieces, Tohru’s shortsword pierced Dominica’s abdomen.

The technique Tohru used was similar to one a boxer might use. Normally, punches required a certain distance between the attacker and the opponent so that the fist had time to accelerate. The impact of the accelerated fist's collision was what destroyed the opponent. However, this technique was different. From a state of repose, his sword pushing against Dominica's armor, to a state of instant acceleration, he smashed through his opponent.

"Did I pry it open?"

With a lurid grin, Tohru twisted the blade in further.

Even if she could heal her abdomen, the skill wasn't all-powerful.

So he didn't pull the sword out. He twisted it in deeper, opening the wound more. Unable to heal, Dominica would lose more and more blood and her physical strength would diminish—

"Gu—!?"

She suppressed the cry coming up her throat with her mouth.

"Y—o—u..."

"Whenever you swing that sword, it's always downward. No thrusts. Not a smidgen of finesse. As for defense, you don't try to parry or read your opponent. All your attacks are a straight line! You have nothing you can consider a

combat technique.

You only seem strong 'cause of that ridiculous battle ability you have."

"...Gu...u..."

Dominica grabbed Tohru by the shoulders with both hands.

He felt his bones creaking in pain from her massive grip strength—but he continued on without paying it any mind.

"You're just like an animal."

"...Boy, you...you..."

"To you, this isn't a battle, is it? This is a 'hunt.' Just a carnivorous beast going after its prey."

Tohru grinned, showing his teeth.

Just one more, for good measure.

“Hey, tell me something. Just how long are you going to continue playing ‘human,’ anyway?”

“...!!”

With extreme force, Dominica thrust Tohru away.

The sword popped out of Dominica’s abdomen and Tohru was blown backwards, slamming into the wall.

All the air in his lungs was forced out from the impact. He was overcome with staccato coughs as he lay collapsed on the floor.

But it wasn’t like he could rest here.

“I always thought it was weird,” he said as he crawled over to the wall next to him. Using it to prop himself up, he was able to stand. “You’re just way too unnatural. You’re not the Dominica Scoda that lost her beloved sister. You’re just someone pretending to be her.”

“...!”

Dominica’s mouth suddenly opened—but apparently unable to think of anything to say, she let out a long sigh in its place.

“What...made you realize?” Dominica asked as she clutched her abdomen. A blue light leaked out, and her wound—along with the damaged portion of her armor—vanished.

“All sorts of things, though it’s hard to put in words. Well, basically, there were no signs of any human living in the mansion. At first we thought the mansion was actually the dragoon transformed.”

“...I see. I was careless, then.” Dominica smiled wryly.

“What happened to the real Dominica Scoda?”

“Dead,” Dominica—or rather, the being *pretending*

to be Dominica—said. “It was illness.” She shook her head pitifully.

Tohru, though, felt like it was an exaggerated action—like he was watching a play.

“That woman longed for death. To stand on the battlefield and forget it all, to let her soul boil over and evaporate. Possessed by the madness of wanting to meet her end in battle, wishing for nothing more than someone to slay her—that was the only thing she had left.”

All that was left to her was her pride as a dragoon cavalier.

But the war had ended, and people now kept their distance from those dragoon cavaliers and their tremendous battle capabilities. Dragoon cavaliers made pacts with dragoons and became one with them for the sake of battle—a deed which earned them the scorn and contempt of orthodox cavaliers.

She was unable to protect her sister. She couldn’t even be there in her sister’s final moments.

She only had her status as a biological weapon—the forfeiture of her own humanity.

Therefore, to fulfill her own existence, she had to be killed in action.

“And yet, she perished of an illness. Day after day, regrets running through her head as she lay on her sickbed, all the while blaming herself over and over again, until she passed away in the throes of despair.”

“I want to fight. I want to fight and I want to die. It’s all I have left.”

Muttering those words continuously on her sickbed—yet dying with her wishes falling on deaf ears. Tohru could imagine.

“...So that’s why, huh?” Tohru narrowed his eyes at her. “That’s why you wanted to ‘fight’ so bad.”

“Indeed. Even if only in form, I wanted to see her wishes realized,” the false Dominica said.

It was akin to putting a photograph of a loved one on display. It was akin to placing a treasured item during the deceased’s lifetime in front of their grave.

“That was all I could do for her. Because...I am not human.”

“...”

Tohru narrowed his eyes.

Dominica's form...began to waver.

A blue light enveloped her, and the image of the human woman began to crumble, something else beginning to take shape in its place.

The transformation magic of a dragoon.

The skeletal structure came together, the bones growing large, and the skin changed color.

The swelling body pushed against the walls, the floor, and the ceiling—pushed them aside, and cracks began to form here and there. Finally, as if unable to bear it any longer, the walls crumbled and the floor rasped, and then—

“So this is...your true form?”

“...No.” With surprising clarity, the fanged mouth responded to his question. “We never had a ‘true form’ to begin with.”

The figure that had appeared while filling the entire room, opening up the ceiling, walls, and floors in the process, was beyond description.

Its height was several times that of a human. Probably at least ten times heavier. It had wings, long limbs, a horn, and a tail—and while that in itself was the very picture of unusual, it also wore armor and held a sword in its hand. Truly befitting of the name “dragoon.”

“This form is what it is because I wished it to be,” the white Feyra said. “Stronger. Faster. Larger. And because of that, in this form, I will not lose to you ever—”

The dragoon stopped speaking, and shuddered slightly.



As if it had just realized what poor condition it was in.

“W...What...?”

“Finally.” Tohru breathed a long sigh.

All this time, he had kept his breathing to the absolute minimum, and he now expelled that air freely. His initial plan was to just break a window, but since the dragoon had popped open the walls, floor, and ceiling, it saved him the trouble.

“Chaika shot magic at you, right?”

“...T-that?”

“Yeah. That was poison magic,” Tohru explained as he regulated his breathing. “That magic Chaika fired changes the quality of the air. With the speed you’ve got, a direct magic attack wouldn’t have been able to hit you. Even if it did, it wouldn’t have even cut or bruised you. And I figured that a fire or lightning-based attack wouldn’t work unless it was powerful enough to blow the whole mansion sky-high. Which is why I gave you poison.”

Poison—you could say the mortar and pestle were a saboteur’s bread and butter.

“And while we’re at it, I’ll tell you that that sword I pierced you with was covered in a different kind of poison,” he said, pointing to his comblade. “That was because I could only guess how much poison one would need to affect a dragon. Akari and I drank an antidote beforehand, but the potency was enough to kill a man ten times over. It was risky.”

The reason why Tohru didn’t use his ace in the hole, “Iron-Blood Transformation,” was to protect himself from the poison in the air. A transformed body would indeed be beneficial in combat, but all the strenuous movement would have made him breathe more than usual.

Also...Akari getting blown away and tumbling into the mansion was actually within their calculations.

From the start, she was to withdraw from the battle quickly, enter the mansion, and cover the windows and cracks with cloth drenched in resin. The goal was to increase the airtightness of the mansion. That was also the reason for the resin-soaked cloth covering the hole that Chaika escaped through. It was necessary to get the mansion to a state where it would leak as little air outside

as possible.

“Under the influence of all that poison, your movements became more pronounced. You can’t create something from nothing no matter how much magic you use, and you must’ve taken in all sorts of air, dirt, and moisture, right? Naturally, that made the poison circulate through your body better.”

“...Guh.”

The dragoon staggered, but supported itself with its forelimb—its arm.

“I see...so I was...completely...done in...?”

“That enough entertainment for you?”

“Ha...ha ha...” The dragoon opened its mouth cavity wide in laughter, displaying its fangs. “I apologize for my rude insults then...”

“That so?”

“But...this is not over yet!” the dragoon said.

And immediately afterwards—the dragoon burst from the mansion, sending the room’s walls and ceiling flying by stretching out its whole body, and unleashed a deafening roar.

Oooooooooohhhhhhhh!!

Pieces of broken building material scattered about, and the ripped wallpaper fluttered in the wind.

In an instant, open air forced its way into the partially-destroyed room that had lost more than half of its roof and walls.

Of course, the poison was already circulating through the dragoon, so no amount of fresh air it breathed now would be enough to restore it to peak condition—and since the poison was running through its whole body and not just part of it, it couldn’t just use its magic to make the poison go away, unlike a wound or bruise.

“Now...!”

Though the dragoon remained unsteady on its feet, it raised its sword, expanded its wings, and flew towards Tohru.

But...

“Come, ‘The Ripper!’”

Chaika’s voice rang out.

She had been waiting on standby outside, and now she fired her severing magic into the dragoon’s wings, amputating them.

“Nghh...!”

The dragoon’s posture crumbled while in the air.

Facing the giant beast, Tohru—

“Hgh!”

Leapt towards it.

Because he had to mind his broken left arm, the jump wasn’t even half as high as it normally would’ve been. However, it was enough.

Tohru aimed his shortsword right at the brow of the dragoon hurtling toward him and prepared to stab.

Then—

“Ooohh!”

With a rending cry, he thrust his sword forth.

And from the giant Feyra’s brow, a flower of red blossomed.

*

The projection device’s innards were complex, so disassembling it took longer than they thought.

Akari had wanted to just smash it open, but they couldn’t risk harming the remains hidden inside. Plus, Chaika had just gone and repaired it, so she had objected. In the end, Chaika had opted to spend time taking it apart, and once she was done she removed the corpse’s remains hidden deep inside—that was to say, two eyeballs belonging to Emperor Gaz, floating in a crystal container.

“This is the real thing, right?”

“Very likely,” Chaika nodded.

“It sure was a pain to get,” Tohru said as he looked over his shoulder at the courtyard.

There—the dragoon lay on the ground, its brow pierced.

“You promised. We’re taking this.”

“...Do what you will.”

The dragoon replied in an unexpectedly calm voice.

There were no groans of anguish, nor anger, nor regret.

It wasn’t like Tohru understood the emotions of Feyra in the first place, but right now the dragoon had its back turned towards him, so he couldn’t surmise what it was thinking.

“Now that all is said and done, I am satisfied. I thank you,” said the silver-white Feyra without preamble.

It seemed like most of the poison had already worn off. What an overpowered creature.

“Yet there is one thing I do not understand. Why did you not finish me off?”

The voice was one of pure bewilderment.

“I have no obligation to commit suicide,” Tohru casually tossed out.

“...Suicide?”

“If you were just trying to put Dominica Scoda’s soul at ease, it was over after I found you out. Until you turned into your dragon form, there wasn’t any need to fight.”

The battle had already been decided when the poison had entered its bloodstream.

Yet she—it was *probably* a female dragoon—didn’t stop fighting.

That may have been because she had now lost not only Dominica, but her own purpose for living.

“I see. That may be so.” Her tone was almost one of admiration. “Perhaps I was dependent on Dominica.”

She spoke as if it were a confession—almost wizened, like an old man reminiscing over the last half of his life.

“Because we were of one body, Dominica’s desires became my desires. Her goals became my goals. So when Dominica’s desires were rendered null, I suppose I as well...”

A dragoon did not feel much pain, and they had impenetrable defense. You could say they were practically immortal.

Despite their high intelligence, dragoons had not developed cultures or civilizations, and it was difficult for them to develop complex emotions. To them, a pact with a human—with a dragoon cavalier—was a truly pleasant thing. However, should a dragoon cavalier’s mind be experiencing fierce human emotions from the mere act of living, should their mind be driven to desperation, those emotions were poured into the otherwise-empty mind of the dragoon.

However—

“Just because Dominica’s wishes are kaput doesn’t mean you have to abandon your own,” Tohru said with a sigh mixed in. “You can do whatever you want. Goals and motives are just a means—an excuse to live.”

“Is that so?”

“I mean, probably. Not like I would know, though,” Tohru said as he scratched his cheek.

He didn’t have any right to be preaching about goals and motives to someone else. After all, until just recently, he was sitting on his ass all day, having lost sight of his own.

But it was for that reason that he also understood how the dragoon felt.

“Of course, I do get the sentiment of remaining alive when you should have died. Just give it up already. Quit playing the warrior and let go of your precious Dominica.”

Tohru had changed his shortsword’s course at the last second—as a result, the blade did split her brow, but the brain and cranium were left intact.

Truthfully, Tohru himself didn't understand why he'd done that. Perhaps he just couldn't bring himself to harbor ill will towards this monster masquerading as Dominica Scoda.

Taking emotions into consideration during a technique was probably grounds for immediate disqualification as a saboteur.

However, while saboteurs were cold-hearted, they weren't cruel.

Using force to kill someone that didn't need to be killed was actually the bigger problem.

"..."

A blue-white light formed around the dragoon's massive body.

The horns, wings, tail, all the fearsome qualities of this beast—melted away like snow and ice. As the form continued to shrink, it began to look more and more frail.

"Miss...Dominica?"

Chaika was about to run up to her, but Akari stopped her.

A dragoon's magic was "transformation magic." They could change their size at will.

In other words—they could probably keep shrinking until there was "nothing left."

Without leaving a corpse, just an ever-present presence—so as to limit those that became aware of the truth of their legendary existence. Perhaps dragoons were that kind of being.

Then...

"Ah, come to think of it..."

—*It* rose all of a sudden, and started speaking.

"I've decided to quit being Dominica, but..."

"..."

Tohru, Akari, and Chaika just stared, their eyes wide open.

It looked over at them from its shoulder and continued speaking.

“To be honest, like, I have no idea what I want to do from here on out. It’s a bit too late for me to return to being a normal dragon now, y’know. It’s like, I wanna reason to live already! A goal, I think you called it? Whaddaya think?”

“Uh, well...” Tohru was absolutely stymied. “Let me ask you something first.”

“Whatcha want?”

“You are...that same dragoon, right?”

“Do I *look* like something else to you?”

Well, she said that—but no matter how Tohru looked, he couldn’t see anything but a young human girl.

She had a cute, somewhat cheeky appearance.

Her outfit was mostly white, in some respects resembling Dominica’s armor.

She looked to be in her mid-teens, about the same age as Chaika.

However, her long golden hair and bloodred eyes gave an almost opposite impression from Chaika. If Chaika was the moon, this girl was the sun. She boasted a presence you couldn’t ignore.

Some of Dominica’s facial features still remained, and she even looked like Lucie a bit...except there was nothing fleeting or ephemeral about her. In its place, there was a curious air of boldness.

At any rate—

“You look like a human to me.”

“Well, that’s ‘cause this it’s easier to talk to you guys in this form.”

“Did you have to change your tone too?”

“You told me to quit acting like Dominica, didn’tcha?”

“...”

What was up with this girl?

She no longer had any of the grim demeanor she had when she was Dominica or even when she had assumed the easy-to-comprehend form of a dragon. She

was like a completely different person.\

But—

Ah, so that's how it is.

Suddenly, Tohru realized part of her intent.

Dragoons were strong creatures. Strong to where they didn't need to rely on others—and therefore, societally ignorant. In other words, they didn't possess the sense of self people acquire from being around those similar to them. Though people had a certain personality naturally from birth, there was also an aspect you could only gain from life experience.

Therefore, this dragoon was merely imitating a human “personality” that was easy to comprehend.

Adopting a personality unlike Dominica's was her way of self-affirming her decision to quit being Dominica.

“—Oh, hey, I just thought of something nice,” the dragoon said, hitting her palm with her fist. “How does this sound: I'm going to kill you!”

She suggested it as casually as if she were taking a walk.

“...Excuse me?”

“Well, yeah, it's like...whaddaya call it? Revenge? Getting even? Yeah, see, you beat me, so...that sounds like a human thing to do, right?”

Ahahahahaha, she laughed brightly.

Absolutely no trace of the grim demeanor just a bit ago.

“Yeah, right! I mean, if you came at me seriously, I'd die instantly!” Tohru yelled, pointing to his broken left arm. It was currently in a splint, a triangular bandage hanging down from his neck. It would probably be a bit before it was completely healed. Of course, the same tricks wouldn't work on her twice, and if the dragoon really wanted to she really could kill Tohru.

“Ah, right, my bad. Let me heal that for you.”

She tottered to where Tohru was and grabbed his broken arm.

“Holy shit that hurts! What are you—?”

“Hup!” she said as she ripped the bandage off and threw the splint away, then with a “time to dig in!”, she sank her fangs into Tohru’s arm.

“Yoowwchh!”

Now having the pain of her fangs, no, canines, stabbing into his arm added to the already-existing pain of a broken bone, Tohru screamed.

“Stop, you’re going to tear it off, you’re going to—wait, huh?”

The pain was receding.

No, wait, he could even see the swelling of the bone going down.

“What...?”

“Phwaphwaphwopha, phwopphaphaphow—”

“I can’t understand you. Let go before you start talking.”

“Puha!” The dragoon girl finally spit Tohru’s arm out of her mouth, and began again. “I said, this is different from a real pact where you exchange part of your body with mine, so if I’m away from you, it won’t work. However, by temporarily biting you with a part of my body, I was able to heal you with my magic.”

“...”

He stared at the arm she’d bit.

The teeth marks had left little holes in his skin from which blood was oozing out—but the broken bone had cleanly and fully healed, and there was no more swelling.

He was shocked at how convenient magic could be.

“...Uh...” Tohru was kind of lost for words. “I suppose I should say...thank you?”

“Sure, sure. All right, it’s healed now, right?” The dragoon girl grinned. “Then let’s fight.”

“We’re not going to fight!”

Tohru yelled at the grinning dragoon.

“No good, huh?”

“Go and find a different purpose in life instead. Preferably a peaceful one,” he said, unrolling the sleeve he had rolled up due to the splint.

“That’s right,” Akari interposed. “You’re a dragoon. I won’t allow you to leave any more mouth marks on Nii-sama’s body. Particularly the nape of the neck, as that area is reserved for me. Finders keepers.”

“Goddammit, shut up! You’re only going to steer this conversation in a weird direction!”

While trying to quell Akari, Tohru faced the girl once more.

“Besides...hey, dragon.”

“Yep?”

“Do you have a name or anything?”

“Ah...” All of a sudden, a cloudy expression crossed the girl’s face. “I have nothing you could call a name. If you had to call me something...‘East 645,’ I guess.”

“What kind of a name is that? Dominica didn’t name you anything either?”

“Dominica was me, and I was Dominica. Dragoons and dragoon cavaliers don’t have the sort of relationship where we need to call each other by name.”

“...”

Tohru thought for a bit, looking up at the sky.

“Then how about ‘Frederica?’”

“...?”

The girl looked genuinely perplexed, but Tohru continued.

“Well, you look like Dominica, so I thought ‘Frederica’ would be good. How about it?”

“What do you mean, ‘how about it?’ Are you giving me a name?”

“Well, calling you ‘hey’ or ‘you’ all the time’s gonna get annoying,” said Tohru. “Well anyway, fighting’s a no-go for now. If you want to fight so bad, bring one

of the remains we're searching for first."

"Ah, that makes sense," the girl—Frederica—said, clapping her hands together.

The reason Tohru's group was fighting in the first place was for the remains. If she happened to have another piece, they would have no choice but to fight her for it, but since she didn't, there was no need.

"Well, I'll be in your care, then," Frederica said lightly, smacking Tohru's chest.

"...Huh?"

"You guys are lookin' for the remains, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Then if I want to acquire some more remains, I'd better go with ya."

"...Uh, wait a minute..."

Did that mean that right before they acquired a piece, she intended to snatch it up and say something like "If you want it, fight me for it?"

"That's some screwed-up reasoning."

"Huh? Really? Makes sense to me," Frederica said, tilting her head.

How should he put it...her appearance and speech might be that of a human, but things like this made it clear she was a Feyra. She was unable to recognize her own obvious strangeness.

"Ah...Chaika, you say something to her. Tell her off."

"Mui?"

Turning around, Chaika's eyes went wide, but—

"Frederica."

"Sup?" Frederica replied.

She seemed to have accepted the name quickly.

"Nice working with you."

"Wha!?"

The overjoyed Chaika.

The yelping Tohru.

The dissatisfied-looking Akari.

And—

“Sure. Nice ta meet’cha!”

Frederica, laughing cheerily.

And just like that, the number of party members on Chaika Gaz’s journey to recover the remains was now four.



Afterword

Hello, this is light novel author Sakaki.

The second volume of Hitsugi no Chaika has now been completed.

Come to think of it, at the time of writing this afterword it will have been a month since the great Eastern Japan earthquake disaster (although by the time this book makes out into the world it will have been about two months, I suspect).

Because I live in Kansai, the rolling blackout and such had no effect on me, and except for worrying about my older brother who lives near the area of the disaster and several fellow authors whom I have not heard from in awhile, my life has pretty much been the usual.

However, I have felt several repercussions in the past month.

Relating to the publication process, probably the most pressing is the ink and paper shortage, PP processed paper in particular—the kind of smooth, slick paper that’s used for the front cover and illustration in light novels. In addition, special colors of ink like “golden” have been scarce.

Well, while I feel that compared to a magazine light novels use considerably less of that stuff, it still apparently led to the editorial department having to scramble around for replacement ink and paper.

But then directly after that came the tempest named “self-control.”

Not only were the few works out there that had content featuring natural disasters culled outright, but neurotic editors even called for refraining from “dark content, like someone fighting to the death out of sheer hatred for their opponent.”

And so as a result, I would like to announce that moving from this volume forward, Hitsugi no Chaika will now, with absolutely no context or explanation, be transformed into a cheerful slice-of life school love comedy. Please look

forward to seeing the truant Tohru, his stepsister Akari, and the transfer student Chaika's fates intertwine in a laid-back, rejuvenating setting.

...Well, of course that's a lie though. (lol)

However, it was true that I had to exercise some self-restraint here and there. I had always disliked the fact that when a natural disaster happens, in the anime industry it's necessary to refrain from broadcasting material containing similar content, but apparently that even holds true in the publishing industry.

I had always envisioned one of Hitsugi no Chaika's core concepts as "people left behind at the end of halcyon days" (though in this case the 'halcyon days' were an era of war). Actually, in the real world, there is apparently a nationwide kneejerk reaction to anything involving the "change" or "end" of the peaceful, everyday era we've had since WWII...for people like us who are in the profession of writing about the "unusual and unexpected," there are a lot of things we're forced to consider.

Personally, I'd have to say that we should keep the tension and the memories of the deceased in our hearts and support our fellow victims, but do so in a quiet and skillful manner. I feel that these aforementioned normal days, our anchor, should be preserved so that everything operates as per usual.

And with that, see you in the next volume!

Ichirou Sakaki, 4/15/2011